

FLIGHT FROM GENTILITY:  
THE ROLE OF WORKING-CLASS CHARACTERS IN DICKENS'S NOVELS

BY

PAM SLAUGHTER

Ph.D.  
UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH  
1981



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
ABBREVIATIONS	v
INTRODUCTION      A LOOSENING OF BONDS	1
PART ONE            'DIVERS FLIGHTS'	
Chapter	
1.       Hidden Depths - The Language of Class in Dickens	37
2.       Life from the Streets - Dickens as Realist	79
PART TWO            ACTIVITY: THE EARLY NOVELS	
3. <u>Pickwick Papers</u> - Leapfrog with Life	118
4. <u>Martin Chuzzlewit</u> - A Storm of Words	153
PART THREE         PASSIVITY: THE MIDDLE NOVELS	
5. <u>David Copperfield</u> - Flight to a Quiet Nook	201
6. <u>Bleak House</u> - The Winnowing Broom	243
PART FOUR          DISCONTENT: THE LAST NOVELS	
7. <u>Great Expectations</u> - 'Dream of a Star'	296
8. <u>Our Mutual Friend</u> - Down to Earth	339
CONCLUSION	383
BIBLIOGRAPHY	407

## PREFACE

The purpose of this thesis is to study working-class characters in Dickens's novels in relation to one particular aspect of social change, namely gentility, and to connect this with Dickens's social criticism and with his distinctive qualities as a creative artist. I shall argue that gentility is not merely a concern with superficial manners and behaviour, but that the concept became, during the last decades of the eighteenth century and the whole of the nineteenth, the most important psychological weapon in the struggle for social and political power in a newly-emerging class society. As such, gentility provides the main target for Dickens's attacks upon class relations and is the focus of his most wide-reaching criticisms of English society. Indeed, so central is the concept of gentility to Dickens's thought, that it can even be used as a critical term to define his own particular kinds of strengths and weaknesses as a writer. It is a main purpose of this thesis to show the interrelationship of these several aspects of gentility with the pattern of Dickens's life and with the changing society of nineteenth-century England.

Part One of this thesis considers Dickens's attitudes to the class divisions within Victorian society by studying his deployment of class language. In this section I also compare Dickens's fictional rendering of working-class characters with that of his contemporaries and his eighteenth-century predecessors, in order to see what is distinctive in

Dickens's treatment, and to evaluate how far he may be termed a realist.

Parts Two to Four trace, chronologically, the development of Dickens's antagonism towards gentility. I divide his work into three periods (early, middle, late), in each of which a different, but recurrent type of working-class character tends to predominate in the novels. The qualities and values Dickens associates with each type can be related to his current underlying social and artistic preoccupations.

Because of the accumulative poetic intensity of Dickens's fictional style, discussion of character or incident, lifted from its allusive context, almost always results in an impoverishment, or even an actual confusion, of meaning. For this reason, the chapters dealing with single novels are divided into two parts. They begin with a general discussion of one particular type of working-class character frequently found in Dickens's fiction. An individual example of this type is then studied in the total context of the specific novel to see how its qualities fit into, and help to shape, the imaginative pattern of the whole work. The novels chosen for this close study are thus those which contain a character who is a major example of one of these recurrent working-class types in Dickens's fiction, and this is why Hard Times and Little Dorrit are not discussed in detail.

A further aim of this thesis is to redress a tendency in Dickens criticism to underrate the role of working-class



characters in the novels. It is striking that Dickens himself consistently speaks of them as among his most important artistic achievements. It is my contention that to ignore this particular aspect of Dickens's work is to miss much of what is most exciting in his art and most radical in his social vision.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I should like to express my appreciation to Dr Peter Keating of the University of Edinburgh, who supervised the writing of this thesis and offered invaluable advice and support throughout the project. I am also largely indebted to Catherine Kerrigan, Dr Anne McKim and my husband for their assistance with proof-reading and for their helpful comments and encouragement.

## ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used for the titles of books by Dickens:

<u>B.H.</u>	<u>Bleak House</u>	<u>N.N.</u>	<u>Nicholas Nickleby</u>
<u>B.R.</u>	<u>Barnaby Rudge</u>	<u>O.C.S.</u>	<u>The Old Curiosity Shop</u>
<u>C.B.</u>	<u>Christmas Books</u>	<u>O.M.F.</u>	<u>Our Mutual Friend</u>
<u>D.C.</u>	<u>David Copperfield</u>	<u>O.T.</u>	<u>Oliver Twist</u>
<u>D.S.</u>	<u>Dombey and Son</u>	<u>P.P.</u>	<u>Pickwick Papers</u>
<u>E.D.</u>	<u>The Mystery of</u> <u>Edwin Drood</u>	<u>R.P.</u>	<u>Reprinted Pieces</u>
<u>G.E.</u>	<u>Great Expectations</u>	<u>S.B.</u>	<u>Sketches by Boz</u>
<u>H.T.</u>	<u>Hard Times</u>	<u>T.T.C.</u>	<u>A Tale of Two Cities</u>
<u>L.D.</u>	<u>Little Dorrit</u>	<u>U.T.</u>	<u>The Uncommercial</u> <u>Traveller</u>
<u>M.C.</u>	<u>Martin Chuzzlewit</u>		

Unless otherwise indicated all these works are cited in the New Oxford Illustrated Dickens edition (1947-58)

## INTRODUCTION

A Loosening of Bonds

When Seebohm Rowntree carried out his survey of poverty levels in York at the end of the nineteenth century, he took, as the most reliable indication of the division between the middle and working classes, the employment or not of domestic servants. In their respective studies of early and mid-Victorian England, J.F.C. Harrison and Geoffrey Best both confirm the validity of this criterion. In the light of modern views on class, Rowntree's observation becomes 'remarkably perceptive', writes Harrison: it goes 'to the very heart of the idea of class itself'.<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Best reiterates the centrality of servants to nineteenth-century class attitudes. 'Every family that could afford a domestic servant, it is safe to say, had one ... No claim to true gentility could be substantiated without a preliminary qualification of servantry in the home ... It is difficult to imagine any mid-Victorian employer of a servant not having some air of relative social superiority'.<sup>2</sup>

The employment or otherwise of servants proves to be equally satisfactory in separating the middle class from the working class within Dickens's fictional world. There can be almost no household or individual described in his

<sup>1</sup> Early Victorian Britain 1832-51 (London, 1979), p. 137.

<sup>2</sup> Mid-Victorian Britain 1851-70 (London, 1979), p. 107.



novels where he fails to indicate the presence or absence of domestic or personal service. Furthermore, categorization by this means always coincides satisfactorily with more subjective indications of a character's social class, and is especially useful in those marginal cases where occupation is not particularly helpful. Thus, for example, the Snagsbys in Bleak House and the Sowerberrys in Oliver Twist, who have some menial help in the home, must be regarded as middle class, while the Gargerys in Great Expectations, the Bagnets, with their small shop, in Bleak House, and the aspiring Kenwigses in Nicholas Nickleby, who are without such aid, remain among the working class - a fact which Mrs Joe herself knows and very much resents. This subjective element is clearly very important. Class is not simply an objective category which can be precisely defined in terms of income or occupation, or even servants; it is also the way people see themselves in relation to others who are perceived as like or unlike. As E.P. Thompson says, 'The finest-meshed sociological net cannot give us a pure specimen of class any more than it can give us one of deference or love. The relationship must always be embodied in real people and in a real context'.<sup>3</sup> Another historian has argued recently that it is important to understand first where people place themselves before attempting to attach our own labels to their consciousness.<sup>4</sup> On these kinds of subjective grounds

<sup>3</sup> The Making of the English Working Class, revised edition (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1968), p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Standish Meacham, A Life Apart: The English Working Class 1890-1914 (London, 1977), p. 15.

it is obvious that characters like Kate Nickleby, Miss Flite in Bleak House, and the Dorrits, with the possible exception of Amy, must be regarded as middle class, despite their lack of servants, extreme poverty and involvement in menial forms of labour. Similarly, the class to which the various criminal types within the novels belong can be determined in a common-sense way from their obvious social attitudes and sympathies. Monks in Oliver Twist is clearly not working class, and equally clearly Riderhood and Wegg in Our Mutual Friend, Magwitch and Orlick in Great Expectations, and Good Mrs Brown in Dombey and Son are.

It is not necessary to put any lower social limit on whom may be included among the working class. Life for all labouring people during the nineteenth century was extremely precarious and few escaped a close acquaintance with poverty. Illness, death, old age, or simply bad luck could plunge a family from relative comfort into desperate need within a matter of days. Such is the fate of Mrs Plornish's father in Little Dorrit, the orphans of Mr Neckett in Bleak House, and almost of the Bagnets in the same novel. Alternatively, even characters suffering from extreme deprivation are shown as attempting to scratch a feeble living from work of some sort. Jo, in Bleak House, sweeps his crossing, Maggy, Little Dorrit's grown-up child, runs errands to support herself, and even the wretched, alcoholic father of Jenny Wren earns some wages to help with the housekeeping.

Although it is thus easy to categorize the characters in Dickens's novels according to class, the results of such

a process immediately raise an insistent question as to the relevance of the undertaking. Is there really anything to be gained in labelling 'working-class' such eccentric, often grotesquely individual characters as Sam Weller, Sairey Gamp, Rob the Grinder, Peggotty, Orlick or Rogue Riderhood? Even their names seem to insist upon their essential quality of non-social, comic caricature. More worrying still is the possibility that such labels will impose meanings and significances where Dickens intended none. In his study of the working class in fiction, Peter Keating distinguishes between two separate traditions for depicting lower-class characters - the industrial and the urban.<sup>5</sup> With the first of these there is no difficulty at all in defining the worker by class: 'He is part of a composite portrait called Labour and is shown to be in bitter conflict with a further composite portrait called Capital'.<sup>6</sup> Clearly in Dickens's fiction the only working-class character who falls within this industrial tradition is Stephen Blackpool in Hard Times. It is because this novel follows the usual industrial tradition in fiction of dealing explicitly and unambiguously with class relations as a central issue that it tends to be singled out from among Dickens's work by those critics and social historians who wish to consider Dickens's views on class. However, few

<sup>5</sup> The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction (London, 1971), p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Keating, p. 7.



readers would regard Stephen Blackpool as one of Dickens's successful characters, or Hard Times as one of his most typical novels, and while both these facts may in themselves tell us something about Dickens's social attitudes, it does not seem wise to place greatest emphasis upon what is atypical or weak in any writer's work. It is more likely that we shall discover what is central to Dickens both as an artist and as a social critic by turning to the novels about the urban world of London in which he is more truly at home.

The lower-class characters who people this world clearly place these works within the urban as opposed to the industrial tradition. They celebrate, as Peter Keating points out, the variety of town life rather than the conflict between two large, hostile groups, and instead of class homogeneity, they highlight 'individual types, especially the bizarre and grotesque'.<sup>7</sup> Far from being preoccupied with class in these novels, Dickens seems to delight in detailing the most extraordinary occupations, like that of Mr Venus in Our Mutual Friend, in dwelling upon outrageously odd behaviour such as Quilp swallowing boiling tea and unshelled eggs, and in creating the superbly eccentric idiolect of a Sairey Gamp. One can sympathise easily with Louis Cazamian's note of perplexity when he writes of Toby Veck, a quaint little ticket-porter who is hero of The Chimes (and already an antiquated figure in 1844 when that story was written)



'how extraordinary it is that two years after the great disputes of 1842, with Chartism in full swing so unrepresentative a worker should have been taken as a symbol of his class'.<sup>8</sup>

Yet there can be no doubt that Dickens does intend Trotty to be recognised as standing for his class - the whole point of the story depends upon this. Although, with his trotting movement and odd speech patterns, he is depicted in idiosyncratic terms, as opposed to the unhumorous, earnest portrayal of the working class within the industrial tradition, it is Trotty who continually voices the general feelings and fears of his own kind, and who speaks finally in the authoritative tones of class prophecy:

I know that our inheritance is held in store for us by Time. I know there is a sea of Time to rise one day, before which all who wrong us or oppress us will be swept away like leaves.<sup>9</sup>

If a character like Trotty Veck, conceived within the comic idiosyncratic tradition of the urban poor can be used thus by Dickens to fulfil a definite class role, there seems no strong reason why other characters within this tradition in his fiction may not be perceived by him in class terms as well, even if not in the simplistic way of Trotty within the fairy-tale form of The Chimes.

This short story also indicates the essential nature of Dickens's criticism of class relations. At the heart of the

<sup>8</sup> The Social Novel in England 1830-1850, translated by Martin Fido (London, 1973), p. 164.

<sup>9</sup> C.B., p. 151.

tale is not his anger at the poverty, insecurity and long hours of debilitating labour imposed upon the working class, dreadful though these things seem to him, but his concern with the erosion of working people's belief in their own worth. Dickens would have agreed whole-heartedly with T.H. Marshall that 'the essence of social class is the way a man is treated by his fellows (and, reciprocally, the way he treats them), not the qualities or the possessions which cause that treatment'.<sup>10</sup> Through the course of The Chimes Trotty Veck is subjected to a relentless stream of propaganda issuing from the various representative sections of the middle and upper classes - Benthamite, Evangelical and Young England's backward-looking toryism - but all with the united message that working people are morally degenerate and utterly worthless. Despite the evidence to the contrary all around him in the kindness, courage and affections of his own kind, Trotty succumbs to this insistent myth, feeling with a hopeless despair that the working class has no right to life or any future in the approaching new year. This insight into the damage inflicted upon the most fundamental belief men have of themselves by class relations is Dickens's original and powerful contribution to the continuing debate about class, and its strength lies in the fact that in this area he writes directly from his own most deeply felt experience.

<sup>10</sup> Citizenship and Social Class (London, 1950), p. 92.

Dickens's interest in class is thus psychological rather than sociological, although eventually his concern with individual effects leads him to a fully developed sense of its pervasive destructiveness as a social force. However, it is always the guerilla war of small-scale, daily, inter-personal skirmishes on the borders of class rather than the massed numbers of industrial battle which catch his imaginative sympathy, and the variable urban world of a city like London obviously provides a more suitable context for dramatising this than the industrial town with its more monolithic social structures.

Furthermore, the modern emphasis on the industrial basis of class can be misleading. Undoubtedly the massing together of large numbers of working people for the first time in the growing industries of Victorian England was a powerful stimulus to the development of class consciousness, but it was by no means the only one, or even the most crucial. Harold Perkin points out that there is little evidence of a growth of class awareness in the very early industrial communities, although it was highly developed among artisans and craftsmen and was even apparent in many rural areas far away from the influence of mass employment.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, as Asa Briggs clearly demonstrates, the language of class, which can only evolve as a result of the formation of class consciousness, was in full use by the 1820's, considerably

<sup>11</sup> The Origins of Modern English Society 1780-1880 (London, 1969), pp. 178-183.



before the establishment of industry on a large scale.<sup>12</sup> Even as late as the census of 1851, agricultural workers and servants still formed the biggest single employed groups in the country. Obviously there must have been earlier social forces involved in the transformation of traditional attitudes into those of a class society, other than the growth of industrial conflict between Capital and Labour in the large industries.

Asa Briggs traces the formation of class language back to the growth of middle-class assertiveness in the last decades of the eighteenth century. 'The phrase "middle-classes" ', he writes, 'which antedates the phrase "working-classes" was the product, however, not of exhortation but of conscious pride'.<sup>13</sup> Samuel Johnson describes English society around the middle of the eighteenth century as one ordered by 'the fixed, invariable, external rules of distinction of rank, which create no jealousy since they are held to be accidental'.<sup>14</sup> However, this belief in an unchallenged, hierarchical ordering according to birth alone was already being seriously undermined by the growing pride of the newly affluent middle class. Increasingly they felt that their importance and value as active begetters of the nation's prosperity entitled them to

<sup>12</sup> 'The Language of "Class" in Early Nineteenth-Century England', in Essays in Labour History, edited by Asa Briggs and John Saville, revised edition (London, 1967), pp. 43-74.

<sup>13</sup> Briggs, 'The Language of "Class" ', p. 52.

<sup>14</sup> J. Boswell, London Journal, (1762-3), quoted in Perkin, p. 25.



greater recognition and influence than was allowed by the traditional aristocratic wielders of political power. Thus the first notes of real class conflict in English society were sounded between the aristocracy, jealous of its time-honoured ascendancy, and the aspiring bourgeoisie. From the start the main psychological weapons of this antagonism were opposing concepts of gentility. Harold Perkin describes this particularly English use of snobbery as 'an active device for preventing upstart inferiors from treading too closely upon one's heels'.<sup>15</sup> The not always successful efforts of the newly rich merchants and capitalists to emulate the life style of their social superiors made them easy targets for aristocratic ridicule, which insinuated that only gentle birth and breeding could sustain true refinement; that the vulgar born would remain vulgar in manner no matter how great their worldly wealth. However, such contempt very often disguised a real fear that their traditional privileges could no longer be taken for granted. As early as 1763, the British Magazine was declaring irritably, and with an unmistakable undercurrent of apprehension:

The present rage of imitating the manners of high life hath spread itself so far among the gentlefolks of lower life, that in a few years we shall probably have no common people at all. 16

Not surprisingly, the novels of the eighteenth century bear dramatic witness to this loss of security in the old

<sup>15</sup> Perkin, p. 93.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Perkin, p. 93.

stable ordering of society. The world Fielding depicts in Tom Jones (1749) fully accords with Johnson's description of a society in which rank is fixed immutably by the accidental rule of birth. The social divisions Fielding shows are vertical not horizontal; the interest of country as opposed to those of town and court. Squire Western feels as much in common with his gamekeeper, Black George, as he does with his sophisticated town-dwelling sister:

'Sister', cries the squire, 'I have often warn'd you not to talk the court gibberish to me. I tell you I don't understand the lingo ...'

'I pity your country ignorance from my heart,' cries the lady.

'Do you?' answered Western, 'and I pity your town learning. I had rather be anything than a courtier'.<sup>17</sup>

Despite his frequently crude behaviour, even cruder language, his drunkenness and unruly passion, Squire Western is never deprived of the deference due to his rank. Birth, not his manner or appearance, is the safeguard of this. However, while his impunity emphasises the security of his order, genteel origins are felt to reveal themselves by outward signs. This is shown most clearly in the persons of the young heroes of eighteenth-century novels. Both Tom Jones and Joseph Andrews, for example, are of obscure birth, but both have an unmistakable appearance of natural gentility. Tom has 'a remarkable air of dignity ... rarely seen among the vulgar', while Joseph is 'so genteel that a prince might, without a blush, acknowledge him for a son'.<sup>18</sup> Birth

<sup>17</sup> Tom Jones, Shakespeare Head edition, 4 vols. (Oxford, 1926), II, 8-9.

<sup>18</sup> Tom Jones, II, 121; Joseph Andrews, Shakespeare Head edition, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1926) II, 136.



inevitably makes itself felt; both of these characters are discovered to be the lost children of gentle parents and the narratives re-establish them in their rightful social positions. Within such an ordered, self-perpetuating world superficial matters like behaviour and speech can be regarded tolerantly, as of little real importance. Even plain speaking or insubordination by inferiors, while they may irritate, are never conceived as a threat to authority; consequently the offenders are usually treated lightly, and are easily forgiven. Indeed, the splendid sense of gaiety, optimism and toleration in these novels is largely dependent upon this deeply-rooted sense of an unthreatened, unchanging world, in which all have their justly-appointed place, and where all confusion will be righted in the end - God's order and man's co-existing in perfect harmony.

The world of Smollett's early novels is more boisterous than Fielding's, lacking his urbane polish, but its social relations are essentially the same. The gentle birth of his heroes provides them with an unquestioned claim to eventual fortune and social distinction, with certainly no regard to their earlier standards of behaviour. However, his final novel, Humphry Clinker (1771) marks a fundamental change, and offers dramatic evidence of the way social attitudes altered during the crucial decades after the mid-century. The tone of the whole work is quieter, and there is a lack of confidence in recounting the kind of crude practical jokes which make up so large a part of Smollett's previous stories. Riotous humour is no longer associated with characters we are meant

to admire, and those who indulge in such are seen as coarse rather than high-spirited. The clearest indication of a change in social attitude is exemplified in the character of Squire Bramble. Like Western in Tom Jones or Commodore Trunnion in Peregrine Pickle he is irascible and passionate, and he shares their contempt for city and court society. From London he writes that everything he has seen and heard and felt of 'this great reservoir of folly, knavery and sophistication, contributes to enhance the value of a country life'.<sup>19</sup> Despite these attributes, Squire Bramble differs from his predecessors in being indistinguishable in speech and manner from those long accustomed to move in the most polished court circle of St. James. Indeed, the thing most calculated to arouse the squire's quick temper is any lack of decorum or propriety. His nephew, Jerry, describes him as having 'the most extravagant ideas of decency and decorum'.<sup>20</sup> The very word 'decorum', used again and again in this novel, introduces a range of ideas which are wholly absent from the earlier works. This new insistence on a sense of what is socially fitting is clearly linked in Humphry Clinker to Bramble's obsessive fears of social upheaval, his sense that the rightful order of his world can no longer be taken for granted, but must be maintained by strict adherence to the outward forms which manifest superior birth and breeding. From beginning to end of the novel, Squire Bramble gives violent expression to his abhorrence of

<sup>19</sup> Humphry Clinker, Shakespeare Head edition, 2 vols (Oxford, 1925), I, 152.

<sup>20</sup> Humphry Clinker, I, 261.



the nouveaux riches whom he sees as a threatening tide of vulgarity, washing over and obliterating the once natural social divisions of national life. From Bath he writes:

All these absurdities arise from the general tide of luxury, which hath overspread the nation, and swept away all, even the very dregs of the people. Every upstart of fortune, harnessed in the trappings of the mode, presents himself at Bath ... Men of low birth, and no breeding, have found themselves suddenly translated into a state of affluence, unknown to former ages; and no wonder that their brains should be intoxicated with pride, vanity, and presumption. Knowing no other criterion of greatness, but the ostentation of wealth, they discharge their affluence without taste or conduct, through every channel of the most absurd extravagance; and all of them hurry to Bath, because here, without any further qualification, they can mingle with the princes and nobles of the land. Even the wives and daughters of low tradesmen, who, like shovel-nosed sharks, prey upon the blubber of those uncouth whales of fortune, are infected with the same rage of displaying their importance ... Such is the composition of what is called the fashionable company at Bath; where a very inconsiderable proportion of genteel people are lost in a mob of impudent plebeians, who have neither understanding nor judgement, nor the least idea of propriety and decorum; and seem to enjoy nothing so much as an opportunity of insulting their betters. 21

There is a strident note of bitterness and hostility in such passages all the more striking since Bramble is depicted as a kind-hearted and humane man. The emotive language betrays the irrationality of class animosity, which stems from a sense of insecurity in an order which can no longer assume that its superior social position is part of an enduring, God-ordained pattern.

Not surprisingly, this loss of confidence reveals itself in a loss of tolerance towards inferiors. Squire Bramble's coachman is peremptorily dismissed for impertinence, and when

21 Humphry Clinker, I, 52-3.

Humphry Clinker, inspired by Methodist zeal, takes to the pulpit, he is threatened with like action if he does not promise in future to 'mind the business of his place'.<sup>22</sup> Humphry Clinker symbolizes even more than the squire the radical change of attitude in this novel. Although the title is taken from his name, and although, like Tom Jones and Joseph Andrews, his obscure birth turns out to originate in gentle parentage - no less than Bramble being Humphry's lost father - there is no easy transformation of this ugly duckling into a gentleman. No natural gentility marks off Humphry with his 'bandy legs', 'stooping shoulders' and 'pinking eyes' from the vulgar mob which the squire has struggled so fearfully to keep at a safe distance.<sup>23</sup> There can be no triumphant conclusion of the narrative with a rediscovered son established in the place ordained for him by birth alone; by 1771, refinement and culture have become equally essential qualities for upholding social rank. With fitting irony Squire Bramble's own breach in propriety causes the fatal weakening of his defences against the threatening tide of presumption; his illegitimate son refuses to break his prior engagement to a fellow servant, Win Loyd. The novel which depicts Bramble's hatred of social disintegration ends with a letter from his new daughter-in-law and erstwhile servant to her former colleagues, which projects the aggressive social claims of the vulgar into the order of his own household:

<sup>22</sup> Humphry Clinker, I, 196.

<sup>23</sup> Humphry Clinker, I, 115.



Being by God's blessing, removed to a higher spear,  
 you'll excuse my being familiar with the lower sarvents  
 of the family; but as I trust you'll behave respectful,  
 and keep a proper distance, you may always depend upon  
 the good-will and purtection of / Yours, W. Loyd. 24

In Fanny Burney's novel Evelina, written only seven years after Humphry Clinker, this threat has become an ever-present, menacing reality. The genteel young heroine finds herself plunged into the very midst of an assertive, materialistic, status-seeking society, where, she complains, 'civility is unknown and decorum a stranger'.<sup>25</sup> Far from birth being the prime criterion of social rank, Evelina feels totally alienated from her blood relations; by culture, behaviour, attitudes and sympathies she is shown by the author to belong rightfully to the refined society of an aristocratic world. In this novel, speech, manner and dress have become the central narrative preoccupations out of which arise almost all the drama and humour of the story. Furthermore, these superficial things are now treated as utterly reliable outward manifestations of inward worth. Fanny Burney considers that to depict Madame Duval as speaking ungrammatically and behaving at times with crude, impetuous passion is quite sufficient to condemn her morally.

Humphry Clinker differs from its predecessors among the eighteenth-century novels in its loss of toleration and its threatened order, but what is completely new in Evelina is the harsh note of total condemnation of certain characters in

24 Humphry Clinker, II, 232.

25 Evelina, Oxford English Novels (London, 1968), p. 239.

which moral judgement is made on the basis of completely social criteria. Reading the novel, it demands a conscious effort against the whole force of the writing to bear in mind that Madame Duval, Evelina's mother, and her cousins, the Branghtons, actually do nothing wrong at all - they simply are wrong. None of them behaves nearly so deplorably as Sir Clement Willoughby, but he is a gentleman, and violent seduction, it seems, does not demand the moral abhorrence reserved for upstart vulgarity.

However, despite Evelina's and her creator's obvious antagonism towards these bourgeois characters, it is their presence which energizes the novel. Fanny Burney may despise them, but she intuitively recognizes their power. The whole Branghton family, Madame Duval, and the lodger, Mr. Smith, have an aggressive energy which simply sweeps away the objections of well-bred gentility. Confronted with their relentless determination, Evelina can only submit to a stronger will, and even the incorrigible Willoughby is routed by the energy of Madame Duval's antagonism. In a striking scene Fanny Burney lays bare that complex mixture of nervous unease, envy, and the competing desires to emulate and to despise those who rank as superiors, which epitomizes social relations only in a society divided by class:

There was something so extremely gross in this speech, that it even disconcerted Sir Clement, who was too much confounded to make any answer.

It was curious to observe the effect which his embarrassment, added to the freedom with which Madame Duval addressed him, had upon the rest of the company. Every one, who before seemed at a loss how or if at all, to occupy a chair, now filled it with the most easy composure: and Mr Smith, whose countenance had



exhibited the most striking picture of mortified envy, now began to recover his usual expression of satisfied conceit. Young Branghton, too, who had been apparently awed by the presence of so fine a gentleman was again himself, rude and familiar: while his mouth was wide distended into a broad grin, at hearing his aunt give the beau such a trimming. 26

Although Evelina escapes from such confrontations into a safe world of aristocratic formality and decorum, the more memorable impression left by the novel is of the restless, striving, vulgar, aggressive society she leaves behind. It offers little in the way of the security and tolerance of the early eighteenth-century world of Tom Jones, but it has the energy and force which point to the future. It is undoubtedly very similar to the world inhabited by Charles Dickens.

In fact the new emphasis on propriety in Humphry Clinker and the tone of moral condemnation in Evelina already mark out the retreat of aristocratic values before the upsurge of middle-class influence. The 'natural gentility' apparent in Tom Jones has nothing whatever to do with narrow notions of behaving properly. Against aristocratic claims for the nobility, refinement and sense of honour conferred by birth and breeding, the aspiring bourgeoisie, often of old dissenting stock, asserted counter-claims for a gentility arising not from birth, but from their own distinctive moral qualities of sobriety, godliness and industry. Harold Perkin describes the conflict for ascendancy between the upper and



middle classes as 'The Struggle between the Ideals', and he claims:

Whichever class came, through the acceptance of its ideal, to control the heart and mind of society could, without itself taking over the State, indirectly control government policy, the content of legislation, and the recruitment and methods of the administrators. This, as we shall see, was the achievement of the capitalist middle class, and the triumph of their ideal. 27

The erosion of aristocratic values can be traced in the change of meaning and usage, during the eighteenth century, of the word 'genteel', the concept at the centre of the struggle. It is the term most frequently used by Lord Chesterfield, one of the great aristocratic figures in the early part of the century, to denote all those qualities of refinement and breeding which manifest a 'Man of Fashion' rather than a 'low fellow'. However, Chesterfield never uses it to imply moral qualities; indeed more often than not he suggests that a genteel manner is more serviceable than virtue since people are impressed more by refined demeanour than real worth. He writes to his son that, 'easy good breeding, a genteel behaviour and address, are of infinitely more advantage than they are generally thought to be, ... even polished brass will pass upon more people than rough gold'.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, in the early novels of Fielding and Smollett the word 'genteel' is used only to denote an outward air of good-breeding, not any pretence to moral virtue. Mr

<sup>27</sup> Perkin, p. 273.

<sup>28</sup> Lord Chesterfield's Letters to his Son, Everyman's Library (London, 1929), p. 22.

Fitzpatrick in Tom Jones, for example, 'being handsome and genteel ... found it no difficult matter to ingratiate himself with the ladies', but, as this sentence implies, Fitzpatrick is by no means a man of moral propriety.<sup>29</sup>

By the end of the century the term 'genteel' had become almost entirely the property of the aspiring middle class, and was never used by them of anyone whose moral virtue was in doubt. The generic meaning of 'gentle birth' had shifted towards a new concept of 'respectable' or 'proper'. However, far from lessening the emphasis on outward manner, this aspect became more important than ever, as can be seen from the preoccupations of the characters in Evelina. Instead of evidence of birth and breeding, correct speech, behaviour and dress became manifestations of the more egalitarian concept of inner worth, but, since this kind of claim was inevitably less easily substantiated than that of birth, it was no longer possible to risk Squire Western's disregard of outward form.

This social concern with behaviour was an easy, almost natural development, from the old puritan dissenting tradition which stressed the visible signs of grace in daily life. Wesley himself had published extracts from an old etiquette book called The Refined Courtier in his Arminian Journal. The growing prosperity of the middle class provided increasing money and leisure to spend upon this goal of gentility, and the last decades of the eighteenth century and the first of

<sup>29</sup> Tom Jones, III, 73.

the nineteenth were remarkable for the number of schools established to teach the sons and daughters of the newly rich the necessary social graces. It also saw a vast output of etiquette manuals and pronouncing dictionaries aimed at the same market. The description, by one of the most popular of these, of the vulgar London dialect as 'offensive' and 'disgusting' provides a good illustration of the increasing identification of social propriety with moral judgements.<sup>30</sup> In a study of language changes in the eighteenth century, Joanne Platt argues that earlier notions of correctness were purely scholarly and carried no social imputation. This changed during the course of the century, largely through the spread of middle-class education, until correctness of speech became 'a primary test of social status'.<sup>31</sup> She concludes that by the nineteenth century 'the vulgar classes were definitely separated from the educated classes by their grammar and vocabulary. Their speech consisted entirely, in the opinion of cultured speakers, of ungrammatical sentences composed of coarse and ill-chosen words'.<sup>32</sup> This same transitional period saw the beginning of the rapid increase in the employment of domestic servants, and this more than all else allowed the middle class to dissociate itself

<sup>30</sup> John Walker, A Critical Pronouncing Dictionary and Expositor of the English Language, 23rd edition (London, 1821), p. 17.

<sup>31</sup> 'The Development of English Colloquial Idiom during the Eighteenth Century', Review of English Studies, 2, 1926, p. 73.

<sup>32</sup> Platt, pp. 77-8.



from all kinds of physical labour and to look upon any such connection as degrading. Clean, white hands thenceforth became the index for genteel status among the middle class also. This retention of latent aristocratic elements within the newly-defined bourgeois concept of gentility inevitably left the middle class vulnerable to aristocratic flattery and patronage once the initial period of class rivalry waned, as it did from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards. However the most obvious and immediate result of the increasing identification of worth with physical appearance, speech and manner was the demoralizing effect this was bound to have upon the working class, whose rough labour, poverty and lack of leisure time made any attempt at social aspiration almost impossible.

Once the emphasis on gentility had shifted from birth to worth, the middle class was obviously able to challenge aristocratic ascendancy from a position of strength. The lack of social jealousy mentioned so approvingly by Johnson, as the result of ranks ordered by the accidental rule of birth, gave way to a competitive race towards the goal of greatest moral sanctity. Most closely associated with this change in social attitudes was the Evangelical Revival which also gained its impetus and influence during the last decades of the eighteenth century. Ian Bradley writes of the Evangelicals:

The concepts which they attacked were essentially aristocratic and the values which they exalted were predominantly bourgeois. The Evangelicals' most persistent complaint was about the dominance throughout society of the views and habits of the aristocracy -

they cited particularly the principle of honour, the cult of fashion, and a penchant for ostentatious and frivolous diversions. Their great aim was to secure the triumph of the virtues of hard work, plain living and moral propriety which characterised the middle 33 classes.

Writing in his diary in 1844, Lord Shaftesbury reveals the extent to which aristocratic ideals had been undermined by those of the evangelical middle class. 'We must have nobler, deeper and sterner stuff; less of refinement and more of truth; more of the inward, not so much of the outward gentleman; a rigid sense of duty, not a delicate sense of honour'.<sup>34</sup>

This middle-class, puritan emphasis on values like duty, hard work, thrift rather than display, and status allotted according to moral worth, found its secular counterpart in the liberal economic philosophy of competitive self-interest and laissez-faire. A competitive society, it was claimed, as opposed to one of aristocratic patronage, would ensure that the greatest entrepreneurial talents could rise to the top, creating new wealth which would benefit the whole nation. Moreover, since such worldly success was but the result of an abundance of solid moral virtues like prudence and application to duty, such men should be regarded also as national moral exemplars. Harold Perkin describes this duality of economics and morality thus: 'The elegant moral symmetry of the "competitive system", which ran throughout classical economics ... appealed most powerfully to both

<sup>33</sup> The Call to Seriousness (London, 1976), p. 153.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Bradley, p. 153.

the moral self-righteousness and the material self-interest of the middle class'.<sup>35</sup>

The corollary of this myth of the inevitable worldly success of the morally fittest is that those who fail in the competitive struggle to make a living and prosper are morally unfit. Samuel Smiles' assertion in Self-Help that 'What some men are, all without difficulty might be. Employ the same means, and the same results will follow', provided a comfortable glow of self-approbation for the prosperous, but it was a bleak judgement of personal inadequacy on those already suffering the physical privations of poverty.<sup>36</sup> The ideal of moral virtue with which the middle class had successfully challenged aristocratic prerogatives based upon birth was found to be an even more efficient weapon for suppressing any similar claims for greater social justice put forward by those even lower down the scale. While men as a whole are governed by an inherent belief that the social order reflects

<sup>35</sup> Perkin, p. 224.

<sup>36</sup> In case the moral logic of this be missed Smiles goes on to make his meaning absolutely clear: 'That there should be a class of men who live by their daily labour in every state is the ordinance of God, and doubtless is a wise and righteous one; but that this class should be otherwise than frugal, contented, intelligent and happy is not the design of Providence, but springs solely from the weakness, self-indulgence, and perverseness of man himself'.  
Self-Help, revised edition (London, 1910), p. 346.



God's hierarchical ordering there can be no intrinsic disgrace in finding oneself in the bottom rank; as Johnson said, place is accidental and can therefore arouse no jealousy. However, in a competitive society status becomes the sign of inner grace, and poverty the natural result of moral unworthiness. The Evangelicals' obsessive insistence on the inherently depraved and sinful state of all men following the Fall, and their emphasis on the call to grace of only the few, who would manifest their inner sanctity by outward signs in their lives, provided a harsh religious justification for blaming the poor for their own misfortunes. Instead of seeing their rough behaviour, propensity to drunkenness and crime, as the inevitable results of their squalid lives, such features were taken as reliable evidence of moral degeneracy.

The event that more than all else helped to harden these kinds of attitudes into intransigence was the French Revolution, and particularly its rapid collapse into anarchic violence at the beginning of the 1790's. All the accounts current at the time describing the atrocities perpetrated by the sans culottes stressed their godlessness, which was manifested outwardly in their bestial behaviour - cartoons frequently showed them eating human flesh - and their savage, uncouth appearance. Turning from such lurid accounts to their own brutalized and suffering working class, a strong reaction of fear hastened the reconciliation of the aristocracy to a middle-class conception of gentility with its emphasis on moral propriety. As Lady Shelley wrote in her diary, 'the

awakening of the labouring classes, after the first shocks of the French Revolution, made the upper classes tremble. Every man felt the necessity for putting his house in order'.<sup>37</sup> To the forefront in their zeal for preserving the safety and distinctions due to those above the necessity of labour were the Evangelicals. One of the most successful of these in preaching to the poor the restraining virtues of resignation and duty was Hannah More, whose Village Politics was written in 1793 expressly to 'counteract the pernicious doctrines which, owing to the French Revolution, were then becoming seriously alarming to the friends of religion and government in every part of Europe'.<sup>38</sup> From thence onwards the Evangelicals were involved in every effort, legislative, educative and religious, to suppress any stirrings of discontent or political aspiration among the working class. Wilberforce supported every repressive measure of a reactionary Parliament, vehemently opposing proposals for an official inquiry into the Peterloo Massacre in 1819. Two years earlier Hannah More was actually approached by the government and asked to produce a new series of tracts to counteract the spread of popular radicalism in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars. The Morning Chronicle in 1827 accurately diagnosed the motives underlying the spread of moral zeal in early nineteenth-century England. In an indignant protest at the loss of old-fashioned Christmas goodwill, which foreshadows Dickens's own emphasis on

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, p. 60.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Bradley, p. 113.



seasonal fellowship, it mocks the new practice of the rich in dispensing Bibles to the poor instead of the traditional beef, concluding:

The creature comforts would too much pamper the flesh and excite perhaps a spirit of insubordination in the 'lower orders' highly offensive to the taste, if not threatening to the privileges of the mighty. A grovelling prostitution of body and soul among their inferiors, effected by half-starvation and drivelling, enervating cant of censurers of other people's enjoyments is most acceptable in the sight of the upper orders. Whether this be sheer hypocrisy or 39  
sour puritanism we will not decide.

A later reporter for the same Morning Chronicle gives us Mr Bumble piously reproaching Mrs Sowerberry for raising 'a artificial soul and spirit' in *Oliver Twist* by philanthropically feeding him upon scraps of gristly meat instead of the gruel suitable to paupers.<sup>40</sup>

Fears of revolution persuaded the aristocracy to conform, at least outwardly, to middle-class ideals of moral gentility. Malthusian prophecies of a pauperized population, seemingly borne out during the agricultural depression following the Napoleonic wars, when soaring poor-rates became an increasing burden in those rural counties most attached to aristocratic traditions, convinced many of them that paternalism must give way to more 'realistic' economic science. J.D. Marshall describes how the social and political unrest which followed the wars 'brought a profound reaction in attitudes to the poor, and there was a marked resurgence of the belief that any kind of charity, over and beyond relief in cases of dire

39 Quoted in Maurice J. Quinlan, Victorian Prelude: a History of English Manners 1700-1830 (New York, 1941), p. 7.

40 O.T., p. 46.



necessity, tended to encourage idleness and vice'.<sup>41</sup> Once again the political and economic interests of the upper and middle classes were justified by pointing to the natural depravity, laziness and sensuality of the working class, which, it was declared, could only be held in check by the sharp lessons of poverty and suffering. 'So far from rags and filth being the indications of poverty, they are in the large majority of cases, signs of gin drinking, carelessness and recklessness', declared Fraser's Magazine in 1849.<sup>42</sup>

There is nothing accidental in the enthusiastic espousal by the governing classes at this time of Malthusian theories of population, classical economics and evangelical morality; all these philosophies provided justification and rationalization for the actions dictated by their own self-interest, and assuaged any resulting guilt by reinforcing their existing prejudices. The Reform Bill of 1832 formalized the reconciliation of interests between Land and Capital in the face of possible threats from an impoverished working class, stirred from apathy by the infectious cry of 'Equality' across the Channel. Its first major measure, the enactment of the New Poor Laws in 1834, symbolized the rejection of the old cohesive paternal relations for the abrasive competitiveness of class interest.

Far more than any direct influence from the French Revolution, it was this change of attitude towards the working class on the part of those with political and

<sup>41</sup> The Old Poor Law 1795-1834 (London, 1968), p. 15.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Michael E. Rose, The Relief of Poverty 1834-1914 (London, 1972), p. 7.

economic power over them, justified by relentless propaganda as to the brutal physicality and moral degeneracy of the poor, that stung them into counter-assertions of their own worth, and thus helped to form a distinctively working-class consciousness. As early as 1829 Southey warned, 'The bond of attachment is broken, there is no longer the generous bounty which calls forth a grateful and honest and confiding dependence'.<sup>43</sup> The competitive harshness which superseded the traditional, paternal tolerance, upheld by men like Henry Fielding, left the working class with little alternative but to recognise the force of its own numbers and begin to fight for itself.

Dickens was too much a man of his own times not to share the anxiety of his contemporaries about working-class potential for revolutionary violence on a mass scale. There can be no doubting the strong middle-class sentiments of his reaction to almost any suggestion of conscious class action on the part of labouring people: throughout his novels runs the fear of revolution and anarchy which coloured his whole age. However, Dickens had also experienced the sense of shame and humiliation that gentility imposes upon those who sink in the competitive struggle, or who can only maintain themselves by physical labour, and he was revolted and enraged by this destruction of men's wholesome pride in themselves.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Briggs, 'The Language of "Class"', p. 46.

Self-respect becomes for Dickens the most fundamental of all human virtues, without which there can be no healthy growth of love for other men and compassion for their suffering. From this insight he came to see how gentility, with its insinuation that appearance and material prosperity inevitably correspond to inner worth, was fashioned into a psychological weapon for class suppression. When birth is no longer the sole criterion of rank, it becomes imperative that the mass of people in society be inhibited by some other means from asserting claims to equality with their rulers and employers. By weakening working people's self-respect, through social scorn for their uneducated speech, rough appearance, awkward posture, and physical labour, and by constantly suggesting that such things were evidence of low moral worth as well, gentility helped to indoctrinate the working class with a spirit of subordination and inferiority. Such feelings inhibited the growth of any aspiring movement of self-confidence which might lead to demands for greater political and economic justice. The Evangelical insistence upon the necessity of sinful natures adopting a posture of total, abject submission before an all-powerful, vengeful God provided a very acceptable pattern for attitudes to worldly authorities as well. Harold Perkin stresses: 'With the emergence of class antagonism morality became the last defence of property short of repression by force'.<sup>44</sup> Even force might have seemed preferable to

<sup>44</sup> Perkin, p. 284.



Dickens than this breaking of men's spirits by eroding their faith in their intrinsic worth, and it is this aspect of class relations rather than economic or political inequalities, which brings forth his most radical social criticism. In this he is perhaps more astute than he is often given credit for; political equality has been achieved with universal suffrage, and the most appalling economic suffering eliminated, but demoralisation, puritanical assumptions of moral superiority, and aggressive counter-reactions which have always characterised English class relations remain stubbornly and destructively active in our society today.

It is part of Dickens's life-long campaign against the demoralizing pressures of gentility on working-class people, that he portrays certain characters from that class, like Joe Gargery, as fully imbued with the Christian virtues upheld in the New Testament. Such nobility of character must be read as his counter-assertion to the Evangelical and Benthamite insistence on the moral degeneracy of the poor. In this he is a direct heir to Blake who asks in 'The Everlasting Gospel', did Jesus 'Give any marks of gentility', and insists that 'God wants not man to humble himself' but rather to 'Adore' his 'own Humanity'.<sup>45</sup> Dickens has Trotty Veck express similar sentiments at the end of The Chimes: 'I know that we must trust and hope, and neither doubt

<sup>45</sup> William Blake, 'The Everlasting Gospel', The Complete Writings of William Blake, edited by Geoffrey Keynes (London, 1966), pp. 748 and 750.

ourselves, nor doubt the Good in one another'.<sup>46</sup>

Dickens's critique of gentility does not rest with this one aspect. He came to see, especially by the time of his later novels, that the very sense of personal insecurity, even of inadequacy, fostered by the moral and economic competitiveness of a class society encouraged an ever greater reliance upon gentility. The seeming gain in equality and liberation for men by the removal of emphasis on birth as the sole criterion of status, created such dread among the middle class of social disgrace by any fall in respectability that they retreated for safety into ever more rigidly conforming standards of behaviour, dress, speech, even thought. Again Dickens follows Blake in his vigorous rejection of a gentility which attempts to curb men's individuality, deny their physicality, and suppress their passions. On a personal level he sees this as leading to the inhibition of the vital energies which generate not only the impetuous humour of men like Squire Western, but also their generous, whole-hearted embrace of life, including their fellow men. Accumulatively, he sees the growing social timidity around him as a threat to the creativity, innovating energies and social vigour of national life. Again, looking at Britain's declining level of achievement from Dickens's day to our own, who can say that his pessimistic diagnosis of the debilitating effects of gentility were not profoundly accurate? In opposition to the life-denying force of

<sup>46</sup> C.B., p. 151.

gentility, with its hostility to variety, sensuality and spontaneous impulse, Dickens presents the challenge of his eccentric, passionate, wildly energetic working-class figures. This too is a reason for turning to the often bizarre urban types rather than industrial workers, or still more, to working-class intellectuals, who inevitably were foremost in adopting a bourgeois sobriety of manner, no matter how radical their politics. E.P. Thompson argues:

Those who have wished to emphasise the sober constitutional ancestry of the working-class movement have sometimes minimised its more robust and rowdy features ... We need more studies of the social attitudes of criminals, of soldiers and sailors, of tavern life; and we should look at the evidence, not with a moralising eye ('Christ's poor' were not always pretty), but with an eye for Brechtian values - the fatalism, the irony in the face of Establishment homilies, the tenacity of self-preservation ... for in these ways the 'inarticulate' conserved certain values - a spontaneity and capacity for enjoyment and mutual loyalties - despite the inhibiting pressures of magistrates, mill-owners, and Methodists. 47

There can be no better place to begin such a study than with the working-class characters in Dickens's novels.

Like any attempt to summarize complex historical change, the foregoing account of the shift from a paternalist society, ordered by birth, into a competitive class society, and the centrality of concepts of gentility to this change, suffers from over-simplification. In reality, of course, the alteration was far less uniform than is suggested here. Remnants of older attitudes remained stubbornly among the

47 E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, pp. 63-4.



new, even in the same men, and theory was not always put into practice by individuals caught up in human situations. Frequently common sense or compassion modified harsh economic or religious doctrines. Neither was the change all for the worse. The break-up of traditional patterns released valuable new energies, and set men free from the straitjacket of preconceived ideas. The very imprecision of the boundaries of class offered scope and encouragement for men to push their talents to the limit. In the hustling energy which overwhelms her heroine in Evelina, Fanny Burney catches the authentic stir of a society on the move. No-one is more filled with this impulse to push upwards than Dickens. It is important that while registering his antagonism we do not overlook how fully he responded to the surging energy of his age. This is what makes his attitudes to class and gentility so complex and entangled. Dickens could well have been one of Samuel Smiles's self-made heroes, and his early novels are filled with a sense of eager, bustling optimism. In both form and content they celebrate an adventurous and energetic spirit which has burst free, socially and artistically, from the bondage of restricted forms and deference to the past - enacting an upward, imaginative flight to personal and creative fulfilment. So strong is his sense of this need to free men's energies that even when he became less optimistic about social change, seeing gentility itself as a new straitjacket for the human spirit, he was never tempted, like so many of

his disillusioned contemporaries, to look wistfully back to an aristocratic past.

Gentility, like class, has its positive side. 'Between 1780 and 1850' writes Harold Perkin, 'the English ceased to be one of the most aggressive, brutal, rowdy, outspoken, riotous, cruel and bloodthirsty nations in the world'.<sup>48</sup> Few, and especially not Dickens, could regret the passing of such qualities. Moreover, gentility did undoubtedly help to set men free in their upward aspiration - manners rather than birth can be acquired by all, and certainly the many self-educated working men who became future leaders of their class could not have succeeded if they had not cultivated qualities of sobriety, rectitude and diligence. The growth in compassion, an increasing sensitivity in personal relationships, and a willingness to appreciate inner qualities of mind, were inevitably attractive to a writer like Dickens, who wished to emphasise above all the importance of human sympathies and the wisdom imparted by the human fancy.

The metaphor of flight in the title of this study is intended to convey this ambivalent mixture of attraction and repulsion in Dickens's attitudes to gentility and class; flight can be either a liberating upward release of energy, or a fleeing away from threat or bondage. In the chapter he entitled 'Divers Flights' in Edwin Drood Dickens himself plays upon these meanings, and the flights he refers to

<sup>48</sup> Perkin, p. 280.

reveal all the ambiguity of the theme. At the beginning of the chapter Rosa Bud runs away from the menace of Jasper's brutal, barely-controlled passion, and at the end of it she ascends to Mr Tartar's 'garden in the air, and seemed to get into a marvellous country that came into sudden bloom like the country on the summit of the magic bean-stalk'.<sup>49</sup> Rosa's flight of fancy, we are meant to realize, will lead her to a romantic, idealized love far removed from the dangerous, physical passion of Jasper. Unfortunately this impulse to escape an unpleasant and brutal reality often becomes, not an upward aspiration of imaginative energy, so much as a retreat into the unrealistic restrictions of gentility. All the indications are that Dickens's presentation of Rosa's love would lack the creative vitality which characterizes his finest writing. Dickens shares the insecurity and the aggressive energy of his own time, and these pressures make themselves felt in the opposing impulses in his fiction, towards what is new and challenging and what is safe and conventional. While his own social situation and personal history lead him towards genteel conformity, his radical sympathies with the working class act as a counterweight, pulling him back to the real world and its challenging energies.

<sup>49</sup> The Mystery of Edwin Drood (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1974), p. 247. This is the only edition which restores Dickens's own chapter heading. When Foster divided Chapter XX into two chapters, he also changed the title to 'A Flight', which all subsequent editions have retained.



PART ONE

'DIVERS FLIGHTS'

## CHAPTER 1

Hidden Depths - The Language of Class in Dickens

In Sketches by Boz the issue of class aspiration was raised by Dickens to introduce his scenes of 'London Recreations'.

The wish of persons in the humbler classes of life, to ape the manners and customs of those whom fortune has placed above them, is often the subject of remark, and not infrequently of complaint. ... Tradesmen and clerks, with fashionable novel-reading families, and circulating-library-subscribing daughters, get up small assemblies in humble imitation of Almack's, and promenade the dingy 'large room' of some second-rate hotel with as much complacency as the enviable few who are privileged to exhibit their magnificence<sup>1</sup> in that exclusive haunt of fashion and foolery.

The automatically condescending tone he adopts here implies that his attitude to such social mimicry differs little from that of many writers, like Fanny Burney, who had made the topic increasingly popular as a subject for jokes and comic writing from about the time of Evelina onwards.<sup>2</sup> The main aim of such writing is to elicit a superior smile at the expense of upstart vulgarity, and only the reference to the 'enviable few' at the close of this quotation hints that Dickens's viewpoint may not be orientated so totally

<sup>1</sup> S.B., p. 92.

<sup>2</sup> Surtees's Jorrocks's Jaunts and Jollities (1838) provides an interesting later example of this type. Jorrocks, himself, is depicted as possessing quite as much extroverted vulgarity and relentless energy as Fanny Burney's Branghtons, but his wife already shows signs of a growing social conformity. Her behaviour is carefully restrained to the pattern of decorum laid down in the Spirit of Etiquette, a manual she frequently consults.

from above his middle-class subject as that of other authors making similar observations. However, the subject is no sooner raised than he appears to dismiss it, reassuring his readers that such social imitation is in fact a rarity, and as proof of this offers a description of the 'different character of the recreations of different classes'.<sup>3</sup> Despite this assertion, social attitudes remain the essential theme of the piece. The first character is a 'regular City man' from Lloyds and his recreation consists in nothing but proud contemplation of his magnificent garden in which 'he never does anything with his own hands', his pleasure arising 'more from the consciousness of possession than actual enjoyment of it'.<sup>4</sup> The light, almost flippant tone of the writing and the earlier reassurance belie the radical nature of what Dickens is doing here. Most earlier writers who criticize social inferiors for aping their betters are content to evoke their comedy from the social blunders and unwitting vulgarity which betray the upstarts to their superiors, both within their fictional world, and outwith it to readers of the novels. There is never any suggestion that the style of life to which they aspire is in itself open to criticism, or is anything less than the ideal standard for those who can maintain it by birth and upbringing. However, Dickens's City man betrays himself to ridicule by no social blunder or

<sup>3</sup> S.B., p. 92.

<sup>4</sup> S.B., pp. 92-3.



vulgarity. It is the effect his wholly successful imitation of a superior life style has upon his sense of values, his enthusiasms and his energies that is mocked. This line of criticism is more subversive than the former, since it throws into question the moral worth of a genteel way of life founded upon such sterile values, no matter how polished the practitioners. The presentation of the man from Lloyds does not mock the unsuccessful middle-class clown, but looks forward directly to Dickens's most radical attack upon the triumphant Victorian bourgeoisie in the form of Podsnap and Veneering.

The two contrasting scenes which follow re-emphasise the essential points of the first. The busy delight of the elderly couple in actually tending their garden themselves, is, according to the narrator, a fast vanishing attitude, giving way to the empty desire of the City man for possession simply to impress others with a due sense of 'the wealth of its owner'.<sup>5</sup> The hours of pleasure which gardening provide for the former are continually self-renewing, and make their own comment upon the useless pride of the latter, which, once expressed, leaves nothing but bored sleep till dinner time. The final sketch is not concerned with ownership at all since it describes the London working class at their local tea-gardens. The scene evokes all those qualities that Dickens attributes to the working class; it is full of noise, energy, and an uninhibited zest for life. The unstinted

<sup>5</sup> S.B., p. 93.

appetite for simple treats like winkles and ginger-beer, the easy gregariousness, the relish for family jokes, and the children's wild games all make a sharp contrast to the vapid debilitating decorum of the City man's establishment where even the young children, followed dutifully by the under-nurserymaid, have only spirit enough to stroll 'listlessly about in the shade'.<sup>6</sup>

None of these telling contrasts between the three scenes is explicitly pointed out by Dickens and the descriptions can be read easily as three separate, only loosely connected, humorous pieces of observed life. The conciliatory tone of the writing and Dickens's introduction, which seems to raise the issue of social ambition only to dismiss it, encourages such a surface reading, and it is difficult to be sure of just how seriously Dickens himself intends the underlying social criticism.

What is certain is that he never again in his fiction uses the word 'class' in so relaxed a way as he does at the opening of this sketch on 'London Recreations'. By the time Pickwick Papers was complete he was a popular public figure, and becoming conscious of his social responsibilities. Part of these he felt to lie in ameliorating the increasing hostility between different classes of society. Since the word 'class' instead of older words like 'rank' or 'order' had come into usage at the same time as this hostility was developing, and indeed, largely as a response to it, it

<sup>6</sup> S.B., p. 93.

inevitably carried as part of its meaning a suggestion of social antagonism which was lacking from the old-fashioned terms. It was this implicit, extra element of hostility within the meaning of the word 'class' which alarmed conservatives and led them to accuse those who used the word of attempting to exacerbate social unrest. Blackwoods, one of the influential voices of conservative England, complained as early as 1825 of the pernicious effect of the language employed by economists and others:

Their anxiety to destroy the obedience of the one, and the authority of the other, was most remarkable. In Mr Brougham's pamphlet on the Education of the People, we think the terms servants and masters are never used; it is constantly - the working classes and their employers ... Why are the good old English words - servant and master, to be struck out of our language? <sup>7</sup>

Although Dickens frequently lampooned such unthinking and intransigent prejudice, describing it as an 'old unmeaning parrot cry than which we remember nothing earlier in our lives', he nevertheless felt it behoved him, as a responsible and popular author, to use this new word with discretion. <sup>8</sup>

Thus, despite his concern with the problems of social and economic inequality which is present in all his fiction, Dickens, speaking in his own voice as narrator, uses the

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Perkin, p. 229. This reluctance, in conservative quarters, to use the word 'class' was stubbornly maintained. Even in 1869, the Quarterly Review, having referred to the 'lower-middle class' apologised 'for using this painful nomenclature'. Quoted in Briggs, 'The Language of "Class"', p. 49, n. 1.

<sup>8</sup> The Speeches of Charles Dickens, edited by K.J. Fielding (Oxford, 1960), p. 203.



contentious word 'class' in only three novels. Not surprisingly, one of these is Hard Times, a novel set apart from the rest of his work by its concern with industrial relations in the north of England. As Peter Keating points out, this theme elicits an attitude of deep moral earnestness in all those who tackle it and a depiction of the working class which is very different from the humorous literary tradition of the urban poor.<sup>9</sup> Thus when Dickens writes of Stephen Blackpool's 'proud consciousness that he was faithful to his class under all their mistrust' he is in little danger of being accused of irresponsibly encouraging class hostility by over-emphasising social divisions.<sup>10</sup> In the special area of industrial relations the language of class had become more acceptable and Dickens's whole treatment of the issue in Hard Times is so obviously moderate and earnestly responsible that only the most prejudiced could possibly have found it offensive.

French society at the time of the Revolution offers a similarly acceptable context for explicit discussion of class hatred in A Tale of Two Cities. Dickens's use of the word in this novel makes it obvious that when he does do so, he is using it in a fully modern sense. 'Monseigneur', he writes, '(often a most worthy individual gentleman) was a national blessing, gave a chivalrous tone to things ... Nevertheless, Monseigneur as a class had, somehow or other,

<sup>9</sup> Keating, pp. 8-9.

<sup>10</sup> H.T., p. 148.

brought things to this'.<sup>11</sup> In both these books, Hard Times and A Tale of Two Cities, Dickens deals with subjects in which the use of class terminology was generally held to be permissible, provided, of course, that the writer showed by his treatment of these subjects that he was not only earnest in his interest, but also on the right side of law and authority. Throughout most of the nineteenth century the concerns and interests of the governing classes of England were predominantly orientated towards the southern half of the country; to London and its surrounding agricultural areas. From such a viewpoint it was not difficult to regard the problems of northern cotton towns and coal mines as isolated pockets of trouble, almost as alien enclaves in an otherwise stable and traditionally deferential country. It was one thing to write of class in the context of the new industrial areas of Britain, but quite another to suggest that the antagonism of class was pervading the whole country. If Dickens had discussed the social problems he depicts in novels like Bleak House or Our Mutual Friend, for example, in explicit rather than veiled class terms, he would undoubtedly have heard much more of that 'old, unmeaning parrot cry'. It is surely because he is so sensitive to this charge and because his conscious intention as an author is to heal, not widen social divisions, that he avoids using this provocative word in most of his novels. Only in Little Dorrit does it slip in when Henry Gowan is described as

<sup>11</sup> T.T.C., p. 216.

having 'as supreme a contempt for the class that had thrown him off, as for the class that had not taken him on'.<sup>12</sup>

However, here the classes referred to are the aristocracy and the middle class so no forbidden area of hidden fear is touched upon.

This reluctance on Dickens's part to use the new class terminology cannot be ascribed simply to an unthinking conservative preference for traditional words like 'station', 'rank' and 'order' which do appear often in his novels, since in his public speeches throughout his career it is the word 'class' which he frequently chooses to use. At Birmingham in 1853, for instance, to give a reading of A Christmas Carol he declares, 'If there ever was a time when any one class could of itself do much for its own good, and for the welfare of society ... that time is unquestionably past'.<sup>13</sup> Two years later he is publicly maintaining that the Administrative Reform Association 'finds class against class and seeks to reconcile them', and he uses the same phrase again in 1865 while speaking to a meeting of the Newsvendors' Benevolent Institution in London.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, as early as 1842, during his first visit to America, he made it quite clear that although characters in his novels are not explicitly designated in class terms, he certainly thinks of them in this way and expects his readers to make the same

12

L.D., p. 314.

13

Speeches, p. 167.

14

Speeches, pp. 203, 340.



connection:

I feel as though we were agreeing - as indeed we are, if we substitute for fictitious characters the classes from which they are drawn - about third parties in whom we have a common interest. 15

Although as narrator, Dickens thus adopts a deliberately conciliatory and earnestly responsible tone for the discussion of social divisions in his novels, not all his characters show the same creditable caution. The working-class characters he favours are never allowed to speak in divisive class terms, but the speech of those characters who represent the conservative and prejudiced attitudes Dickens detested is liberally sprinkled with the terminology of class. Mr Chester in Barnaby Rudge insists upon 'the natural class distinctions', Mr Dombey refers disdainfully to 'the inferior classes' and Sir Leicester Dedlock fears the mischievous designs of 'the lower classes' towards erasing social boundaries.<sup>16</sup> Sir Joseph Bowley in The Chimes condemns ordinary working people with 'Ingratitude is known to be the sin of that class', and Podsnap annihilates the foreign gentleman by informing him that 'Only our Lower Classes say "Orse" '.<sup>17</sup> All these characters represent the most reactionary and unsympathetic elements in Victorian society - those most selfishly and relentlessly opposed to any change lest it threaten their own social and financial advantages. What I think Dickens hopes slyly to insinuate

15 Speeches, p. 21.

16 B.R., p. 200; D.S., p. 59; B.H., p. 13.

17 C.B., p. 106; O.M.F., p. 133.

by putting these expressions into their mouths, is that it is they, by their insulting and patronising superiority and cynical indifference, who create class consciousness and social gulfs, not those who seek to understand and minimise differences by honest discussion and enquiry.

Another reason for Dickens's avoidance of explicit class language in his novels may well be his genuine dislike and distrust of the kind of stereotyped thinking such language can easily promote.<sup>18</sup> Facile class images, clichés and platitudes are a frequent target of attack throughout his fiction. A great deal of his work can be read as an extended attempt to expose the callousness and hypocrisy of the myth that the sensibility of the poor is as unrefined as their rough external appearance. The complacency of those like Miss Knag in Nicholas Nickleby who sleep servants in a damp back kitchen since 'these sort of people ... are glad to sleep anywhere! Heaven suits the back to the burden',<sup>19</sup> is only slightly less abhorrent to him than those like Mrs Pardiggle in Bleak House who insist upon the moral depravity of the poor. The Chimes which Dickens boasted to Forster

<sup>18</sup> In his article on the Preston strike, Dickens actually gives this as a reason for not resorting to the language of the political economists: 'I always avoid the stereotyped terms in these discussions as much as I can, for I have observed, in my little way, that they often supply the place of sense and moderation'. 'On Strike', Household Words, 11 February, 1854, reprinted in Miscellaneous Papers, edited by B.W. Matz, (London, 1908), I, 454.

<sup>19</sup> N.N., p. 218.

was to strike a great blow for the working class, is a comprehensive attack upon all these forms of malicious, stereotyped, class assumptions.<sup>20</sup> However, it is not only middle-class labelling of working people that is exposed as false. Dickens is equally critical when characters from the working class exploit conventional platitudes in order to assert their own brand of moral superiority. Uriah Heep and his mother parade their charade of the humble poor solely for the purpose of moral blackmail. Mr Jeremy Cruncher's insistence in A Tale of Two Cities that he is 'an honest tradesman' and Riderhood's harping on 'the sweat of his brow' in Our Mutual Friend are both attempts to play upon the stereotyped image of the honest working man in order to disguise their real deviousness. Indeed, almost invariably, anyone who is rash enough to deploy class language or stereotypes in a Dickens novel is bound to turn out a bad lot in one way or another, whatever his social position.

The one predominating image to which the Victorian bourgeoisie aspired was the magic title of 'gentleman'. The earlier conflicting views of gentility persisted in this concept, leading to continual attempts, throughout the century, to define it both in terms of inner qualities and outward manner. There can be no serious nineteenth-century writer who did not contribute his quota of words to this endlessly fascinating subject. The vagueness as to its exact

<sup>20</sup> John Forster, Life of Charles Dickens, 2 vols. (London, 1966), I, 334.



meaning in no way lessened the attraction of the idea to the socially ambitious middle class, and by the reign of Victoria it was undoubtedly the single most important concept in the whole language of class in England. The attitude of Dickens, in his fiction, to this particularly significant social label is ambiguous, if not contradictory. He uses the word fairly frequently and seems, on the surface at least, to accept its conventional implications. A gentleman, to be worthy of the title, must be a man of honour, generous in his dealings with others, easy of manner, affording a chivalrous protection to the weak, and disregarding of the more ignoble pressures of worldly affairs. Appearance and manner would seem to be the least important elements in the make-up of a gentleman for Dickens, and those characters in his novels who are impressed by such matters are shown to be at fault, as when Young Bailey in Martin Chuzzlewit praises Montague Tigg on account of his whiskers. 'You can't see his face for his whiskers, and can't see his whiskers for the dye upon 'em. That's a gentleman, ain't it?'<sup>21</sup> Mr Flintwich in Little Dorrit is similarly bemused by the 'swagger and ... air of authorised condescension' of Blandois into thinking him 'a highly gentlemanly personage'.<sup>22</sup> Blandois' own pride in his small white hand as a badge of his gentility is likewise mocked by Dickens, and even Little Dorrit's pride that it is

<sup>21</sup> M.C., p. 421.

<sup>22</sup> L.D., p. 350.

often said of her father that 'his manners are a true gentleman's' is shown to be sadly misplaced.<sup>23</sup> Despite all this Dickens seems unable or unwilling to eliminate manner and appearance completely from his concept of what makes a gentleman. In David Copperfield, the headboy's 'gentlemanly way' puts David at his ease during his first day at Dr Strong's school.<sup>24</sup> In Our Mutual Friend, Twemlow is offended when Mr Podsnap mistakes him for Veneering, since 'he is ... sensible of being a much better bred man than Veneering', and in Little Dorrit Mr Merdle, robbed of mystery in death, is revealed as 'a heavily-made man, with an obtuse head, and coarse, mean, common features'.<sup>25</sup> The butler, who like all servants, may be relied upon in matters of delicate social discrimination, gives the verdict, 'Sir, Mr Merdle never was the gentleman, and no ungentlemanly act on Mr Merdle's part would surprise me'.<sup>26</sup>

Mr Pocket's definition of a gentleman as given by Herbert to Pip in Great Expectations seems apposite here:

It is a principle of his that no man who was not a true gentleman at heart, ever was, since the world began, a true gentleman in manner. He says, no varnish can hide the grain of the wood; and that the more varnish you put on, the more the grain will express itself.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> L.D., p. 97.

<sup>24</sup> D.C., p. 228.

<sup>25</sup> O.M.F., p. 8; L.D., p. 705.

<sup>26</sup> L.D., p. 708.

<sup>27</sup> G.E., p. 171.

It is a gentlemanly heart then which must dictate that outward manner by which one will be able to recognise a gentleman, and indeed Dickens goes out of his way to stress this spiritual quality of gentlemanliness. Ham, in David Copperfield, is said to have 'the soul of a gentleman', John Chivery's heart in Little Dorrit swells 'to the size of the heart of a gentleman' and Mrs Lammle gives as a reason for confiding in Twemlow, 'You have the soul of a gentleman'.<sup>28</sup> While examples like these affirm Dickens's belief in a gentlemanly ideal, none of them is able to bear the full weight of representing such an ideal for Dickens, as Major Dobbin does for Thackeray in Vanity Fair, for instance. Even Mr Pocket and Twemlow remain too ludicrous to be taken seriously enough. In them unwordly disinterestedness falls over into ineptitude, and with them both, but especially with Twemlow, the entanglement with genteel idleness robs their characters of the strength of purpose and the positive quality needed to sustain an ideal. They are decent, but socially impotent figures.

Part of the charm of gentlemanly values like disinterestedness, grace of manner and nobility of soul for Victorians was the pleasing contrast they offered to the insistent materialism, hard-headed forcefulness and almost brutal manner of many of the new, self-made men of business, who espoused the less romantic ideals of facts, money and work. As such a contrast, appearance and manner could not be

<sup>28</sup> D.C., p. 443; L.D., p. 219; O.M.F., p. 416.



wholly excluded from the concept of a gentleman, no matter how much inner refinement was stressed. Despite the apparent antagonism between these two ideals they came to recognize their need of each other - the gentlemen required cash to uphold their graceful style and the businessmen desired the genteel glamour they did not themselves possess. In Hard Times Dickens describes this marriage of convenience:

Moreover, the healthy spirits who had mounted to this sublime height were attractive to many of the Gradgrind school. They liked fine gentlemen; they pretended that they did not, but they did. They became exhausted in imitation of them; and they yaw-yawed in their speech like them ... There never before was seen on earth 29 such a wonderful hybrid race as was thus produced.

Josiah Bounderby epitomises the self-made man who is totally lacking in outward grace and spiritual refinement, and the character who stands as his perfect foil is James Harthouse, gentleman. As Angus Wilson points out, Harthouse is one of a series of similar types in Dickens's novels and it is through this recurrent depiction that Dickens makes his most conscious and consistent analysis of the gentlemanly ideal.<sup>30</sup> The first appearance of this type is Mr Chester in Barnaby Rudge, and he is a striking improvement in terms of presentation upon the crude caricatures found in Nicholas Nickleby in the characters of Sir Mulberry Hawk and Lord Verisopht. Mr Chester models his behaviour, manner and

29 H.T., p. 124.

30 'The Heroes and Heroines of Dickens' in Dickens and the Twentieth Century, edited by John Gross and Gabriel Pearson (London, 1962), pp. 3-11.



course of actions upon the detailed advice offered by Lord Chesterfield in his letters to his son, Philip Stanhope, and Dickens, too, fastens upon this eighteenth-century figure as a prototype not only for Chester, but for the subsequent characters of Steerforth, Harthouse and Wrayburn. His familiarity with the style, tone, content and underlying psychology of Chesterfield's notorious Letters is responsible for the superb solidity of these presentations and also for the depth of understanding he brings to them.

Only tediously lengthy quotation could illustrate how faithfully Dickens models his characters upon the real man, how subtly he mimics Chesterfield's phraseology, verbal habits and speech rhythms. Chesterfield's Letters too, are full of dramatic illustrations, scenes Chesterfield visualizes for the benefit of his son, actions and gestures to be acquired or avoided; all these Dickens utilizes in his novels. Superficially, Mr. Chester is the closest to the original, but he is the least interesting of this series of characters being conceived entirely as a heartless villain whose only interior doubts concern his ability to preserve the perfect suavity required by his gentlemanly code. Like Lord Chesterfield, Mr. Chester has had his son, Ned, educated in Europe that he may acquire the outward polish essential to social success. Although he imitates his master's affectionate address of 'dear boy' when he speaks to Ned, he is prepared to sever family bonds should his protégé fail in gentility. As he awaits Philip Stanhope's return from the continent, Chesterfield warns him:



I should run away from you with greater rapidity, if possible, than I now run to embrace you, if I found you destitute of all those Graces. 31

Not to be outdone Mr. Chester tells Ned, 'I candidly tell you, my dear boy, that if you had been awkward and overgrown, I should have exported you to some distant part of the world'.<sup>32</sup> Mr Chester also faithfully obeys Lord Chesterfield's advice to maintain this coolness of judgement in every concern of his life. Imperturbability and unflustered social grace are the essential requirements of a gentleman, and honesty and genuine feeling must always be subordinated to these ends. In letter after letter, Lord Chesterfield strives to impress upon his son the priority of outward manner over all other qualities:

The world judges from the appearance of things, and not from the reality ... and a man who will take care always to be in the right in those things, may afford to be sometimes a little in the wrong in more essential ones ... With nine people in ten, good breeding passes for good nature ... you must labour, therefore, to acquire that great and uncommon talent, of hating with good-breeding, and loving with prudence. 33

In the confrontation scene with his old enemy Mr Haredale, Chester is shown as a skilled practitioner of the talent Lord Chesterfield admires. He derives a 'quiet exaltation' from his own urbane poise in the face of the other's passion and loss of control. Such is his sense of superiority that he graciously bestows a parting word of advice which has all the easy complaisance of his mentor:

31 Chesterfield's Letters, p. 87.

32 B.R., p. 119.

33 Chesterfield's Letters, pp. 269-70.



You are really very wrong. The world is a lively place enough, in which we must accommodate ourselves to circumstances, sail with the stream as glibly as we can, be content to take froth for substance, the surface for the depth, the counterfeit for the real coin. 34

The supreme accommodator to circumstances is James Steerforth, the most captivatingly charming of all Dickens's gentleman figures. The physical grace, the seemingly delicate spontaneity of his response, and above all, his imperturbability whether he is dealing with teachers, fishermen, waiters or women are shown as irresistible, especially to those who are socially insecure like David. Compared to the narrow religious harshness of the Murdstones and the vulgar brutality of Creakle, Steerforth's lightness of spirit seems indeed to epitomize a finer order of being. Nothing emphasizes his apparent noble sensitivity of soul so well as his warm unassuming manner towards the family at Yarmouth. His first meeting with Peggotty and Barkis seems a triumph of graceful sympathy:

He stayed there with me to dinner - if I were to say willingly, I should not half express how readily and gaily. He went into Mr Barkis's room like light and air, brightening it and refreshing it as if he were healthy weather. There was no noise, no effort, no consciousness, in anything he did; but in everything an indescribable lightness, a seeming impossibility of doing anything else, or doing anything better, which was so graceful, so natural and agreeable, that 35 it overcomes me, even now, in remembrance.

But David realizes in retrospect that this whole performance means nothing more to Steerforth than a 'brilliant game'

34 B.R., p. 91.

35 D.C., p. 310.

played in the 'thoughtless love of superiority' and that 'consciousness of success in his determination to please, inspired him with a new delicacy of perception, and made it subtle as it was, more easy to him'.<sup>36</sup> Steerforth is as much an heir to Lord Chesterfield as the designing Mr Chester. He has commanded those heights of gentlemanly conduct which Chesterfield describes as 'to have volto sciolto and pensieri stretti; that is, a frank, open and ingenuous exterior, with a prudent and reserved interior; to be upon your own guard, and yet, by a seeming natural openness, to put people off of theirs'.<sup>37</sup>

However, Steerforth, unlike Chester, has moments of self-doubt. The main attraction of David for him is in the appreciation of a lost innocence, for Steerforth's cynical superiority to other men is acquired only by losing belief in the worth of everything else. Dickens makes us feel all the grace and charm of the ideal, but instead of implying that these attributes are merely the outward manifestations of spiritual nobility, he suggests that such qualities are actually incompatible with real human warmth. For Dickens it is the worldly Lord Chesterfield who reveals the truth behind the ideal of gentility, not the impossibly virtuous Sir Charles Grandison, whose emotions are always so attuned to his virtue that he is never betrayed into an impulsive act or an angry word, let alone a ridiculous posture. By the

<sup>36</sup> D.C., pp. 310-11.

<sup>37</sup> Chesterfield's Letters, p. 77.

time he came to write David Copperfield Dickens was aware not only of the exterior charm of the Chesterfieldian gentleman, but also of the underlying tone of isolation in his Letters. He perceives that in order to achieve Chesterfield's ideal of graceful, polished ease one must be totally disengaged from life - the perpetual onlooker, never an active participator. Those who allow themselves to become involved with people and situations must, like a Mr Pickwick or a Traddles, often act without restraint or forethought and frequently appear ridiculous or pathetic. For Dickens, the ultimate evil is to withdraw from this active response to life, and the result is always a kind of living death. All of his characters based upon the gentlemanly ideal suffer from a continual sense of boredom, all of them play with other people's lives and their own as if they are of no value, and all of them have a compulsive need to escape the fearful vacuum within themselves.

This nihilistic cynicism is the central emphasis in Dickens's characterization of Harthouse in Hard Times - 'weary of everything, and putting no more faith in anything than Lucifer'.<sup>38</sup> However his easy manner and charm are also stressed. The 'lightness and smoothness' of his speech, like Steerforth's, cleverly suggests 'matter far more sensible and humorous than it ever contained', which, adds Dickens, rather pointedly nodding towards his model, 'was perhaps a shrewd device of the founder of this numerous sect, whosoever

<sup>38</sup> H.T., p. 119.



may have been that great man'.<sup>39</sup> The real difference between the presentation of Steerforth in David Copperfield and Harthouse in Hard Times is that whereas Steerforth is seen as an exceptional character, wilfully destroying his own potential for good, Harthouse is explicitly declared to be only one example of a general type which is now seen as a threat to the whole well-being of society:

Publicly and privately, it were much the better for the age in which he lived, that he and the legion of whom he was one were designedly bad, than indifferent and purposeless. It is the drifting icebergs setting with any current anywhere, that<sup>40</sup> wreck the ships.

This represents the lowest point of the gentlemanly ideal in Dickens's novels, where the deliberate assumption of cynicism and indifference is put forward by Harthouse as a superior kind of moral virtue. Such is the inevitable result of aristocratic contempt, like Chesterfield's, for any outward expression of strong feeling, genuine enthusiasm or zealous purpose. It is typical of the pernicious effect of the gentlemanly ideal upon its imitators that someone like Harthouse should regard the only good action he is ever prevailed upon to perform as the most shameful episode in his life. This discomposing of his normally impenetrable veneer of sophisticated ease by the direct simplicity of Sissy Jupe prepares for the total destruction of Eugene Wrayburn's pose of boredom by Lizzie Hexham in Our Mutual Friend, which completes Dickens's development of this type

<sup>39</sup> H.T., p. 121.

<sup>40</sup> H.T., p. 179.

in his fiction. Initially, Wrayburn bears all the qualities of a Chesterfieldian gentleman - indifferent, cynical and aloof. Even more than Mr Chester he exults in maintaining a cool posture of offensive scorn towards his opponent, the emotional and ungentlemanly Bradley Headstone. The highly charged scene between the two men, in which Dickens explores with painful accuracy the intolerable cruelty of the gentlemanly pose for those like Headstone on the receiving end, closely follows a similar scene envisaged by Chesterfield. His Letters also provide a pattern for Eugene's behaviour towards Lizzie, and again predict the fate of poor Headstone:

If one of them has command enough over himself (whatever he may feel inwardly) to be cheerful, gay, and easily and unaffectedly civil to the other, as if there were no manner of competition between them, the lady will certainly like him best, and his rival will be ten times more humbled and discouraged; for he will look upon such a behaviour as a proof of the triumph and security of his rival; he will grow outrageous with the lady, and the warmth of his reproaches will probably bring on a quarrel between <sup>41</sup> them.

However, by the time of Our Mutual Friend, it is Podsnappery, not the gentlemanly legions of Harthouse that Dickens fears most, and he reactivates the latent antagonism between these two parties, finding in Wrayburn's alienation from bourgeois values a potential from which to evolve an alternative system of values to the middle-class ethic he had come to hate. It is only this alienation which is upheld in Eugene, all other of his gentlemanly attributes remain morally repugnant to Dickens and have to be surrendered for

<sup>41</sup> Chesterfield's Letters, p. 268.



his redemption. This comes, not through a marriage of convenience like that depicted in Hard Times, but in a marriage of love to a woman from the equally alienated working class - a class moreover, typified by turbulent passions, spontaneity of feeling and action, and a complete lack of outer refinement. When such a point is reached the gentlemanly ideal has been transmuted out of existence.

Reading Lord Chesterfield's Letters it is difficult to decide whether he is motivated more by admiration for the ideal of social grace he upholds, or by horror of falling into the lowness he so constantly deplores. Certainly the dramatic involvement one feels in the many pictures he envisages of social ineptitude underlines the real pressure of such fears upon him:

An awkward address, ungraceful attitudes and actions, and a certain left-handedness (if I may use that word), loudly proclaim low education and low company ... The very accoutrements of a man of fashion are grievous encumbrances to a vulgar man. He is at a loss what to do with his hat, when it is not upon his head; his cane ... is at perpetual war with every cup of tea or coffee he drinks; destroys them first, and then accompanies them in their fall. ... His clothes fit him so ill, and constrain him so much, that he seems rather their prisoner than their proprietor. He presents himself in company, like a criminal in a court of justice; his very air condemns him. 42

This is the very stuff of much of Dickens's comedy involving the working class. Joe in Great Expectations, especially, could have been modelled on such descriptions of a 'low' character, and Chesterfield's reference to a criminal in court is also of interest in connection with Magwitch in this

42 Chesterfield's Letters, p. 123.



novel. When Joe comes to visit Pip in London, awkward and constrained in his 'preposterous' cravat and noisy 'state boots', he acts out, before Pip's genteel discomfort the whole ridiculous charade delineated by Chesterfield.<sup>43</sup> So embarrassed is he by his hat that it elicits a whole paragraph of Dickens's most brilliantly comic writing before it can be brought under control. But although Dickens may well be using Chesterfield's Letters in this way as a source for some of his working-class figures, as well as for his gentlemen, his attitude towards such unsophisticated characters could not be more different. Although they may be viewed as ridiculous through the eyes of gentility, yet they are shown to possess qualities which are fundamental to Chesterfield's concept of a gentleman. Far more even than Steerforth they are able to tune themselves to the unison of others. Their generous natures provide them with the kind of tactful concern for the feeling of other people which allows them to rejoice in their pleasures, share their sorrows and enjoy their fun without conscious effort. Such honest accommodation to circumstances comes from an instinctive delicacy of understanding and thus never strikes the false note which betrays the emotional uninvolvedness of all the fine gentlemen from time to time, even of Wrayburn himself. The sympathetic delicacy which Dickens presents in some of his working-class characters is always accompanied by the kind of honest simplicity and total lack of affectation which

<sup>43</sup> G.E., pp. 207-212.

makes it impossible that they ever appear really silly. After his stumbling awkwardness before Pip in London, Dickens takes care to end Joe's visit with a reassertion of his honesty and good sense in a way which highlights his decent, natural dignity of demeanour at the expense of Pip's offensive display of gentlemanly refinement. The point Dickens is making about such 'low' characters in his fiction is expressed explicitly in Hard Times in connection with Stephen Blackpool. When Stephen agrees to accept some of the money offered him by Louisa Bounderby after he has been sacked by her husband, Dickens comments upon the manner of his response:

He was neither courtly, nor handsome, nor picturesque, in any respect; and yet his manner of accepting it, and of expressing his thanks without more words, had a grace in it that Lord Chesterfield could not have 44 taught his son in a century.

Others of Dickens's contemporaries, notably Carlyle, made attacks upon aristocratic dandyism and cynicism. Only Dickens, however, takes the whole ideal of 'the gentleman' apart to insist that the outward form of a romantic and chivalrous dream of charm and grace, to which other writers remained attracted, was actually inimical to genuine sympathetic involvement. Furthermore, although other writers were ready to pay lip-service to concepts like 'nature's gentlemen' only in Dickens's fiction is the idea treated seriously enough to flesh out characters like Joe, capable of sustaining such a claim. Richard Faber rightly points out

44 H.T., p. 160.

that the term 'gentleman' can never be 'entirely divested of its class associations' no matter how much 'gentility might be proposed as an ideal for all humanity'.<sup>45</sup> This is a linguistic problem which Dickens cannot fully solve, but he goes much further than most of his fellow Victorians would wish or dare by suggesting that if the ideal is to be sustained, it will depend not upon the gentlemanly class at all, but upon the good nature and honest delicacy found among the poor. The truest refinement of spirit he shows is inevitably in uneducated working-class characters like Joe or Stephen Blackpool or the Peggottys. Pip's pitying response to Magwitch upon the marshes has a tact and grace, which puts to shame his later ungainly reception of the returned convict, who ironically believes he has made Pip into a gentleman. Magwitch is the final ironic twist in Dickens's comprehensive dealings with Lord Chesterfield. Magwitch, like the great lord, has an absolute horror of being thought 'low', and Magwitch too undertakes the task of making a gentleman of the child, christened Philip, whom he affectionately terms 'dear boy'. How Dickens must have relished this sly identification of the eighteenth century's most urbane and renowned gentleman with his own toothless, uncouth, criminal outcast. Just as Magwitch reverses Pip's normal view of the world when he tips him upside-down in the graveyard, so Dickens reverses in his fiction the normal meanings implied by terms like 'gentleman' and 'low'. The

<sup>45</sup> Proper Stations: Class in Victorian Fiction (London, 1971), p. 143.



words Pip murmurs as Magwitch dies take on their full import only when the verse is completed - 'for everyone that hath exalted himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted'.<sup>46</sup>

Publicly, Dickens was careful to assert that he had no desire to break down social distinctions in the way this analysis of his depiction of the gentlemanly ideal seems to suggest. Speaking to working men at Birmingham he emphasised that it was the 'fusion of different classes, without confusion' that he desired, and at a meeting of the Administrative Reform Association in 1855 he declared his belief in the virtue and uses of both Aristocracy and People.<sup>47</sup> In his novels social distinctions are always tacitly observed; his exemplary working-class characters may well be true gentlemen, but they always know their social place and are content to remain within it. When young Martin Chuzzlewit, humbled by his American experiences and full of appreciation of Mark Tapley's courage and unselfishness, insists that they are friends rather than master and servant, Mark Tapley himself is shown never to presume to this relationship. Moreover, Mrs Lupin, a character who obviously has Dickens's full approval, is quick to check any social impropriety that Martin's flattering recognition might tempt Mark to commit:

<sup>46</sup> Luke 18. 10-14.

<sup>47</sup> Speeches, pp. 167, 203.

'For his friend,' said the hostess, evidently gratified by this distinction, but at the same time admonishing Mr. Tapley with a fork to remain at a respectful distance. 48

Running contrary to this desire to maintain respectful distances in his fiction is the urge to recall men to a sense of their common humanity; to stress like Carlyle in Sartor Resartus, the shared physical necessity underlying superficial variations in dress, speech and manner. In Oliver Twist, for example, he points out the illogicality as well as the inhumanity of treating people differently solely on account of their outward appearance:

What an excellent example of the power of dress, young Oliver Twist was! Wrapped in the blanket which had hitherto formed his only covering, he might have been the child of a nobleman or a beggar; it would have been hard for the haughtiest stranger to have assigned him his proper station in society. But now that he was enveloped in the old calico robes which had grown yellow in the same service, he was badged and ticketed, and fell into his place at once - a parish child - the orphan of a workhouse - the humble, half-starved drudge - to be cuffed and buffeted through the world - despised by all, and pitied by none. 49

More often than by such direct statements Dickens resorts to imagery to suggest men's ultimate fellowship in life and death. Frequently these are tinged with vaguely religious sentiments which echo biblical warnings against the futility of worldly pomp. Bringing man's social pride literally down to earth with timely reminders of dust to dust is one of Dickens's continual preoccupations in his novels, despite

48 M.C., pp. 659-60. At times this concern with a deferential acceptance of social place is taken to absurd lengths, as, for example, in Dombey and Son, when Susan Nipper, married to wealthy Mr Toots, insists upon wearing her old service clothes when she visits her former mistress, Florence Dombey.

49 O.T., p. 3.



their comedy and life. In Bleak House, for example, having praised the nobility of Sir Leicester's attitude to his disgraced wife, he is quick to emphasize the universal nature of such virtue:

His noble earnestness, his fidelity, his gallant shielding of her, his generous conquest of his own wrong and his own pride for her sake are simply honourable, manly and true. Nothing less worthy can be seen through the lustre of such qualities in the commonest mechanic, nothing less worthy can be seen in the best-born gentleman. In such a light both aspire alike, both rise alike, both children of dust shine equally. 50

The most recurrent image used in his fiction to stress such dusty equality among men is that of a journey on which all men are equal pilgrims travelling towards their common goal. In Dombey and Son he writes of 'creatures of one common origin, owing one duty to the Father of one family, and tending to one common end', and in Great Expectations at the trial of Magwitch the sun shining alike upon prisoners and judge is a reminder of 'how both were passing on, with absolute equality, to the greater Judgement that knoweth all things and cannot err'.<sup>51</sup> The kind of lofty vantage point afforded by the sun or stars, or indeed by a divine overview, is another device favoured by Dickens to shrink all worldly human differences to mere specks of insignificance:

And thus ever, by day and night, under the sun and under the stars, climbing the dusty hills and toiling along the weary plains, journeying by land and journeying by sea, coming and going so strangely, to meet and act and react on one another, move all we restless travellers through the pilgrimage of life. 52

50 B.H., p. 794.

51 D.S., p. 648; G.E., p. 434.

52 L.D., p. 27.



Equality which only manifests itself in death offers little threat to those anxious to preserve the status quo of social relationships in this world, and indeed, promise of a fairer deal in the next was a favourite device of those, like Hannah More for example, who strove to subdue discontent among the working class by prudent religious teaching. However, the claim for the commonness of humanity which Dickens urges is far less comfortable than this, asserting a bond of necessity upon the relationship of men in this world which, he insists, they cannot finally deny. Although such a claim is never explicitly formulated in any novel, he does, rather surprisingly, state it very clearly in an article written for All the Year Round in February, 1860. Protesting against a preacher who continually addresses his working-class congregation as 'fellow-sinners' he asks, 'Is it not enough to be fellow-creatures, born yesterday, suffering and striving today, dying tomorrow? By our common humanity, my brothers and sisters, by our common capacities for pain and pleasure, by our common laughter and our common tears, by our common aspiration to reach something better than ourselves ... Surely, it is enough to be fellow-creatures'.<sup>53</sup>

This impassioned demand forms the structural base upon which most of Dickens's novels are built. From Oliver Twist onwards he utilizes a recurring formal pattern which places either illegitimacy or illicit love, or both, at the centre

53 'Two Views of a Cheap Theatre', All the Year Round, 25 February, 1860, reprinted in U.T., p. 36.

of each novel's structure where it acts as a catalyst bringing together characters from all social levels and eventually revealing the hidden bonds of their shared human nature. Illegitimacy forms a recurrent structural device in eighteenth-century novels too, but there its use within the narrative pattern is to assert the underlying orderliness prevailing in the social and natural universes. Dickens's nineteenth-century adaptation of this motif serves the opposite purpose, rupturing a falsely imposed order to reveal underlying areas of guilt and shame. The inexplicitness of his treatment may well stem from the fact that he is moving close, not only to social fears, but to aspects of his own early life about which he too was ashamed and secretive.

It is a matter of fact, and was well known, if rarely stated, at the time, that during the nineteenth century the most common and certainly the most intimate contact between the classes was through prostitution and seduction. What the eighteenth century had done openly, the nineteenth century continued to do covertly. In Peregrine Pickle, Smollett declares that the hero and his friend 'governed their actions by certain notions of honour' in regard to young ladies of good families but 'among the lower class of people, they did not act with the same virtuous moderation, but laid close siege to every buxom country damsel that fell in their way; imagining ... it would be in their power to



atone for any damage these inamoratas might sustain'.<sup>54</sup> By Dickens's time such frankness would have been considered outrageous, but in actuality this attitude towards poor women was vastly more widespread than ever, since middle-class men as well as young bloods were driven, by a frigid code of respectability and later marriages, to seek sexual pleasure elsewhere, while poverty conveniently forced increasing numbers of women into prostitution as a means of subsisting. Engels describes prostitution as almost epidemic among lace-makers on account of their totally inadequate income and the exploits of the author of My Secret Life makes it quite clear that poverty left the majority of working-class women vulnerable to the financial pressures of ardent gentlemen.<sup>55</sup> Thus illicit love and resultant illegitimacy became twin sources of a great reservoir of hidden guilt in Victorian society and provided Dickens with a ready-made image of both the exploitative nature of all class relations and of the intimacy of contact between classes which the respectable middle class refused to acknowledge.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle, Oxford University Press, paperback (London, 1969), p. 166.

<sup>55</sup> Frederick Engels, The Condition of the Working Class in England, (Frogmore, St. Albans, Herts., 1969), p. 221. My Secret Life and the whole subject referred to here, is discussed at length by Steven Marcus in The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth Century England (London, 1967).

<sup>56</sup> Walter E. Houghton gives the figure of 42,000 illegitimate births in England and Wales for the year 1851, quoting Dr William Acton that on this estimate 'one in twelve of the unmarried females in the country above the age of puberty have strayed from the path of virtue'. The Victorian Frame of Mind (London, 1957), p. 366.



The great efficacy of such an image was that it had the inbuilt power to evoke a sense of guilt in the most complacent of his readers. The very secrecy and hidden nature of this relationship made even the most proper families feel vulnerable to the threat of sudden revelations which might link them by blood with those they affected to despise. 'Bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh, shadow of his shadow' - thus Mrs. Snagsby in her relationship to Mr Snagsby, but flesh she knows is not kept inviolable by a marriage ceremony which leads only to the frigid respectability of her bed. The shadow which haunts her life, as she haunts her husband's, is the spectre of disgrace in the form of Jo, wretched outcast of society - but somebody's child. She knows, as Alice Marwood's mother insists in Dombey and Son, 'There's relationship without your clergy and your wedding rings - they may make it, but they can't break it'.<sup>57</sup>

Dickens does not, of course, mechanically place the illegitimate child of parents from mixed classes at the centre of each novel; rather illicit love, or more often the child who results from that love, is used as a formal device for linking together characters from seemingly disparate sections of society. The shame and secrecy which characterizes this linkage is an exact reflection of the shame felt, but not admitted, by most respectable Victorians about the presence of the poor in their midst. Dickens sees the

<sup>57</sup> D.S., pp. 824-5.

refusal to accept publicly the fact of sexual exploitation of the weak by the strong for what it is, simply the starkest, most dramatic form of general class exploitation. The secrecy surrounding sexual contact is only one aspect of respectable society's refusal to acknowledge publicly that all their physical well-being and satisfactions depend upon the labouring poor. Like Pip, in Great Expectations, when he discovers that his wealth derives from the sweated labour of a convict, middle-class society found the truth underlying its comfortable living too distasteful for honest scrutiny. Just as the responsibility for the appalling prostitution and illegitimacy figures were shuffled off in evasive myths of the depraved sexual appetites and promiscuity of working-class women so the terrible poverty of much of the working class was blamed upon its own lack of self-restraint and frugality. Engels writes of the twenty or thirty people who had died of starvation since his arrival in England, that no matter how unequivocal the evidence the middle-class jury always finds 'some back door through which to escape the frightful verdict, death from starvation. The bourgeoisie dare not speak the truth in these cases, for it would speak its own condemnation'.<sup>58</sup> Dickens shows one of Engels' jurymen in action. Mr. Podsnap is questioned at a dinner party on just this issue of starvation among the working class:

<sup>58</sup> Engels, p. 59.

I must decline to pursue this painful discussion. It is not pleasant to my feelings. It is repugnant to my feelings. I have said that I do not admit these things. I have also said that if they do occur (not that I admit it), the fault lies with the sufferers themselves.... Besides,' said Mr. Podsnap, flushing high up among his hairbrushes, with a strong consciousness of personal affront, 'the subject is a very disagreeable one. I will go so far as to say it is an odious one. It is not one to be introduced among our wives and young persons, and I -' He finished with that flourish of his arm which added more expressively than any words, And I remove it from the face of the earth. 59

Like sex, the exploitation of the working class is a subject which is locked away from public view in Victorian England. Like Mrs General in Little Dorrit, one of the basic functions of gentility is to 'cram all articles of difficulty into cupboards, lock them up, and say they had no existence'.<sup>60</sup> The poor, as Dickens sees it, are all the illegitimate children of the nation whose existence is too shameful to be mentioned in respectable society.<sup>61</sup> When Dick Swiveller, in The Old Curiosity Shop, creeps down the back stairs, he finds what is quite literally the skeleton in Mrs General's cupboard - the starved, maltreated little servant girl who is also the illegitimate daughter of Sally Brass and Quilp. It is a perfect piece of symbolism, exposing the truth below stairs of Victorian England.

59 O.M.F., p. 141.

60 L.D., p. 450.

61 The idea did not occur to Dickens alone. 'Orphans we are, and bastards of society', declared the Pioneer, an early Owenite journal, in March, 1834. Quoted in Briggs, 'The Language of "Class"', p. 68.



In the early novels this structural pattern is kept fairly simple. Oliver Twist, the illegitimate child of seduction and illicit love is born in a parish workhouse - the ultimate stigma of social shame. As a direct result of this origin he becomes involved in a series of misadventures which bring such respectable members of society as Mr Brownlow and Rose Maylie into personal contact with the subterranean world of thieves, murderers and prostitutes. The final unravelling of Oliver's secret reveals that many of his misfortunes have been inflicted deliberately by the malice and greed of his evil legitimate half-brother, son of a marriage without love. In Nicholas Nickleby, the wretched outcast Smike who is harried to death by neglect and brutality turns out to be the son of a secret marriage of Ralph Nickleby. When the truth is forced home upon him that his callous greed has caused the death of his own unknown flesh and blood, Ralph commits suicide in remorse. In Barnaby Rudge, Hugh, another of society's outcasts, and leader of the mob which attacks the homes of wealth is revealed to be the illegitimate son of Sir John Chester and a gypsy woman hanged at Tyburn. In David Copperfield, the different classes of society are linked through the exploitive passion of Steerforth for Emily and this explicit treatment of the theme is returned to in Our Mutual Friend. In Hard Times, Dickens proves his point by parody. Bounderby publicly proclaims his own shameful birth and upbringing. The skeleton in his cupboard is in fact his respectable old mother whom he leaves in neglected poverty. Bounderby's

brand of bullying moral blackmail, however, depends for its effect upon the existence of a layer of social guilt among his middle-class audience.

In the remaining novels this structural pattern grows very complex and connects itself with another recurring structural element in Dickens's fiction. In Nicholas Nickleby, some of the boys released from captivity at Dotheboys Hall drift back to the place. In Barnaby Rudge, Dickens tells how some of the prisoners set free by the mob likewise return compulsively to their burnt out cells. In Little Dorrit, this motif of a doomed circular flight which returns to its starting point expands into the main structural pattern of the whole novel. In most of the later works the emphasis on illicit love and illegitimacy comes to centre increasingly upon the impossibility of personal escape from one's past, from shame, and from the physical demands of passion which gentility tries to stifle. Again and again in these novels, origins assert their physical claims and men and women are forced to recognise the impossibility of flight from the bondage of their own flesh into the frozen safety of genteel posturing.

In Dombey and Son, Mr Dombey, man of wealth and frigid social eminence is forced into familiarity with figures as wretched and shameful as those of Good Mrs Brown and her daughter, Alice. The connection is wrought by Alice's desire for revenge on the man who took advantage of her poverty to seduce and ruin her - the same man who ruins Dombey by attempting to seduce his wife. Alice's mother has

indeed an earlier connection with the Dombey family since in her youth she was fair game to Dombey's brother. Early in the novel, while at the height of his secure respectability, Mr Dombey is repulsed by the thought of his intimate dependence on people as low as the very decent Toodle family, when it becomes necessary to find a wet-nurse for little Paul. 'It was a rude shock to his sense of property in his child, that these people - the mere dust of the earth, as he thought them - should be necessary to him'.<sup>62</sup> With fine ironic effect this proud, disdainful man is forced down to yet closer contact with the dust in acknowledging and making use of a far more degrading and more nakedly personal connection with the lowest and least respectable elements of society. 'In this round world of many circles within circles,' writes Dickens in the novel, 'do we make a weary journey from the high grade to the low, to find at last that they lie close together, that the two extremes touch, and that our journey's end is but our starting-place?'<sup>63</sup> Paradoxically these words could reveal more of Dickens's meaning if taken literally rather than symbolically.

In Bleak House, Lady Dedlock seeks refuge from the shame which exposure of her past will bring in a posture of frozen hauteur, even more impressive than Mr Dombey's. However, her

<sup>62</sup> This passage was deleted at proof stage due to Dickens overwriting the number. It is recorded in the Clarendon edition of Dombey and Son (London, 1974), p. 20.

<sup>63</sup> D.S., pp. 495-6.



past guilty passion for Captain Hawdon brings her into contact first with disreputable Jo and then with the destitute family of the brickmaker. Captain Hawdon dies as 'Nemo' without identity, and is given a pauper's burial. Lady Dedlock in the last circular flight of her life actually merges her identity in that of the poor, beaten wife of the brickmaker, and dies on the graveyard step swept clean by Jo to express his sense of fellowship with Nemo, 'our dear brother departed', the only person who ever admitted a bond of kinship with him - 'I'm as poor as you today, Jo'.<sup>64</sup>

In Little Dorrit, Arthur Clennan's suspicions about his father's sense of guilt lead him to an involvement with the Dorrit family in the Marshalsea and with the poor inhabitants of Bleeding Heart Yard. Ultimately it is revealed that business dishonesty has not been the cause of Mr Clennan's uneasy conscience but the suppression of a will in favour of Little Dorrit as part of Mrs Clennan's long revenge for the fact that Arthur is not the child of her marriage but of her husband's secret passion for another woman.

Great Expectations is undoubtedly the novel in which Dickens gives most perfect expression to his belief that individuals of all classes are united by strong unacknowledged bonds of common humanity - 'that the two extremes touch, and that our journey's end is but our starting place'. To Pip, aspiring to gentility, his early entanglement with Magwitch

<sup>64</sup> B.H., p. 149.

the convict, literally 'unaccommodated man' - 'smothered in mud, and lamed by stones ... and torn by briars' becomes a nightmare memory of dread and shame which he thrusts with horror to the remotest corner of his mind lest it should contaminate the purity of the ideal to which he strives.<sup>65</sup> Estella, with her cold aristocratic beauty shining distantly at Pip from the remoteness of her social grandeur seems as far removed and alien from the wretched animal-like Magwitch as a star is from the dust. But, of course, Estella is no other than the daughter of Magwitch and a suspected murderess, and Pip, following the fine ironic inevitability of the plot, journeys, like so many of Dickens's later characters the full circle back to his despised beginnings.

'Dust to dust' is a warning which takes on unexpected new meaning in the context of the structural pattern of Dickens's mature novels. In them, flight from areas of guilt and fear is shown to be doomed and those who attempt it are brought down to earth and forced to acknowledge its claims. Dickens insists that the common physical humanity which manifests itself in passion, birth, starvation, physical suffering and death cannot be swept from the face of the earth by the strictures of gentility. Like the emaciated corpses crammed into the overflowing paupers' burial ground in Bleak House these aspects of human nature deemed too shameful to mention cannot be stamped down out of sight. Continually they rise up in ghastly figures to declare the

<sup>65</sup> G.E., p. 2.

kinship of flesh and blood with those who foolishly believe that gentility has removed them beyond the touch of sordid reality.

This reading of the structural elements which compose Dickens's texts seems very distant from the cautious conservatism of the author who avoids class terminology in order not to give offence. From his very earliest writing on social attitudes in Sketches by Boz it is possible to read Dickens in two ways. On one level, often through explicit statement, language choice and tone of voice, Dickens seems very close to writers like Carlyle and Arnold, expressing a brand of concerned, benevolent, but ultimately conservative, paternalism. This reflects the public role that Dickens consciously adopted as he became a famous man, and the dedication of Hard Times to Carlyle seems to confirm this assumption. The short Christmas tales he wrote, which he felt to be closely identified with this public image, are admirable expressions of his earnest philosophy and do not move beyond this level.

However, his major novels often reach, through implicit means like structural pattern, imagery and a subversive vein of humour, towards areas and conclusions which bring him closer to the democratic radicalism of the New Testament, Blake and Romantics like Shelley. In seeking to understand his novels it is important to give full weight to both these levels of reading; to avoid the temptation to assume that one is more valid than the other. The real Dickens comprises



both, and the challenge is to discover how these two apparently contrary tendencies work themselves out within the text; how far the flight from one pole to the other - from genteel responsibility to radical criticism - provides a dialectical tension which gives energy to his art, and how far the irreconcilability tends to fragment the novels into warring parts.

CHAPTER 2Life from the Streets - Dickens as Realist

As George Ford amply demonstrates, Dickens's reputation among what might be termed his critical readers has undergone something of a revolution from its lowest point in the years following his death to its present high esteem.<sup>1</sup> However, on the whole, the working-class characters in his novels have not participated in this renewal of critical approval, largely because character study in general has come to seem old-fashioned and naive. There is, I suspect, the additional reason that many of the more sophisticated readers of Dickens tend to relegate his presentation of working-class characters to that part of his work still felt to be embarrassingly sentimental, politically simplistic, and best ignored. Even though social realism may no longer be regarded as offering a truthful, neutral window on the world, still, it must be judged better that a novelist conveys even bourgeois reality to none at all, or to a sentimental caricature of that reality. A falsifying sentimentality is precisely the criticism made of Dickens's depiction of working-class characters by George Eliot, one of the finest proponents of social realism in English fiction,

<sup>1</sup> Dickens and his Critics (Princeton, 1955).

as early as 1856, when she wrote:

We have one great novelist who is gifted with the utmost power of rendering the external traits of our town populations; and if he could give us their psychological character ... his books would be the greatest contribution Art has ever made to the awakening of social sympathies ... But for the precious salt of his humour, which compels him to reproduce external traits that serve, in some degree, as a corrective to his frequently false psychology, his preternaturally virtuous poor children and artisans, his melodramatic boatmen and courtezans, would be as noxious as Eugène Sue's idealised proletarians in encouraging the miserable fallacy that high morality and refined sentiment can grow out of harsh social relations, ignorance and want; or that the working-class are in a condition to enter at once into a millennial state of altruism, wherein everyone is caring for everyone else, and 2 no-one for himself.

Those present-day critics who do concern themselves with Dickens's working-class characters usually express very similar reservations to these. Richard Faber, for example, says much the same thing in his study of Class in Victorian Fiction, without attempting any detailed analysis to prove his point. 'His working-class characters when good at all, tend to be too good for this world', he writes.<sup>3</sup> In a discussion of Dickens's correspondence with John Overs, the cabinet maker, Sheila Smith concludes, 'So at a time in his life when he was accounted his most radical, Dickens shows himself unable to comprehend his need, both as a social reformer, and as an artist, to approach the working man as

<sup>2</sup> 'The Natural History of German Life', Westminster Review, July, 1856, lxvi, in Dickens: The Critical Heritage, edited by Philip Collins (London, 1971), p. 343.

<sup>3</sup> Faber, p. 78.



a serious, complex human being'.<sup>4</sup> This condemnation of Dickens as an artist is made solely on an examination of the character of Will Fern in the short Christmas story, The Chimes, although by the time this was published in 1844, he had already completed six major novels. One cannot help feeling that Sheila Smith would have been more circumspect in reaching her conclusion if she had not believed she was confirming a generally accepted assessment of Dickens's depiction of the working class in his fiction. The only way such recent critics dissent from George Eliot's verdict is in questioning the quality of Dickens's sympathy for his working-class characters. Those in the tradition of Humphry House, who like to stress Dickens's undoubted middle-class affiliations, while not denying the charge of sentimentality, point also to what they see as evidence of an often unsympathetic distance between author and subject. Thus John Carey condemns the unreality of the depiction of the Toodle children in Dombey and Son and suggests that the purpose of such 'complacent' sentimentality is to 'bring political comfort ... While the workers have such contented children, the middle classes may sleep safely in their beds'.<sup>5</sup> With characters from the working class, like Sairey Gamp, who do not provide such easy targets for dismissal on grounds of sentimentality Carey discerns a 'disdainful and supercilious

<sup>4</sup> 'John Overs to Charles Dickens: A Working Man's Letter and its Implications', Victorian Studies, XVIII, December, 1974, p. 217.

<sup>5</sup> The Violent Effigy (London, 1973), p. 146.

note' in Dickens's humour which links him to such characters as Sir John Chester in Barnaby Rudge and Skimpole in Bleak House who 'drive to an extreme the contempt Dickens felt for those who were not successful, not gentlemen, and not Dickens'.<sup>6</sup>

It seems paradoxical that this aspect of his work, which is most easily written off by later critics, is one of those upon which Dickens himself set high store and would perhaps have staked his claim to continuing regard as an author. Such considerations should surely make us pause and look more closely and comprehensively at the way working-class characters are presented in the whole range of his fiction. Such a study suggests that in his depiction of working-class characters Dickens not only conveys a reality about working-class life which is more complex and challenging than that conveyed in middle-class depictions of the subject by such differently orientated and accredited writers as Eliot, Carlyle and Engels, but that he moves far beyond the range and depth normally understood by the term social realism. These achievements are closely related to the innovatory artistic techniques he developed, to his inventive adaptation of earlier traditions within the novel, and most particularly to the fluidity of his authorial relationship to his subject.

George Gissing, who set himself the task of writing with what he felt to be scrupulous accuracy about the London

<sup>6</sup> Carey, p. 74.

working class, and by no means uncritical of Dickens's abilities in this respect, is emphatic in paying tribute to one aspect of the latter's achievement. Discussing the Nubbles family in The Old Curiosity Shop, who are often singled out for criticism, even by such Dickens enthusiasts as Chesterton, Gissing declares, 'Remember that such a scene as this was new in literature, a bold innovation. Dickens had no model to imitate when he sat down to tell of the joys of servant-lads and servant-girls with their washerwomen and sempstress mothers'.<sup>7</sup> It is perhaps surprising looking back to Dickens's predecessors among the great eighteenth-century novelists to realise how true Gissing's claim is. Even in a novel like Moll Flanders, set in the context of London's underworld of pickpockets, petty thieves and criminal gangs, no real insight is given into the lives or characters of any of these individuals. Everything in the novel is filtered through the eyes of Moll, bourgeois to her fingertips, despite any fall in her social circumstances. To her, social inferiors, by however small a margin of respectability, are simply objects for her convenience and scorn, completely beneath any concept of individuality or concern. Unlike Nancy, in Oliver Twist, who listens with compassionate horror to the clock striking away the last hours of condemned men in Newgate, Moll only exults at the prospect of her accomplices meeting a like end in so far as their final silence enhances her own safety. Even when she

<sup>7</sup> Charles Dickens: A Critical Study (London, 1898), p. 182.



is deported as a common thief, Moll Flanders continues to speak with the unthinking assurance of one who sees social inferiors only in terms of their physical usefulness and capacity for labour:

All this cargo arrived safe, and in good condition, with three women-servants, lusty wenches, which my old governess had picked up for me, suitable enough to the place, and to the work we had for them to do, one of which happened to come double, having been got with child by one of the seamen in the ship, as she owned afterwards, before the ship had got so far as Gravesend; so she brought us out a stout boy,       8  
about seven months after our landing.

Apart from the callousness of the tone here, it is the complete lack of interest in these 'lusty wenches' as individuals which points to an essential quality in Dickens. He could never have shown such a complete lack of curiosity in these three cockney girls wrenched suddenly from their familiar city world to a hazardous, uncomfortable journey and a strange, alien life in the American colonies. Such bizarre human contrasts and individual oddity are the very stuff of Dickens's imaginative world, and in this respect the girls' lack of sophistication and education, far from rendering them unworthy of attention, would have increased the potential excitement of the subject for him.

Where Defoe may have influenced Dickens more is in his sense of the adventure and bustle of London streets, where all kinds and classes of people rub shoulders with each other; where Moll chats casually to young Lady Betty while relieving her of her watch, where a thief speeding past from

<sup>8</sup> Moll Flanders, Everyman's Library (London, 1972), p. 293.

pursuit drops a parcel of stolen goods at her feet, and where a house on fire fills the vicinity, as if by magic, with a jostling crowd of onlookers, thieves, servants and a few trying genuinely to help. But again the difference is revealing. Defoe's crowds remain unknown and the people within them disconnected from one another. Even when drawn by the same stimulus like the burning house, there is little of the vitality and interchange of people sharing common assumptions about the police, or the beadle, or Punch and Judy shows, or just the problems of child-rearing which Dickens renders so marvellously whenever he gathers two or more people together on the streets, be it in Staggs's Gardens, Cook's Court, or Bleeding Heart Yard. Dickens's street scenes are always solid with a sense of detailed reality and the individual voices that speak out from the crowd have an idiosyncratic authenticity which can only arise from his sure perception of the experiences, lives and whole social context behind them.

Henry Fielding has none of Defoe's apparent callousness towards the poor. Like Dickens he enjoys insisting upon the generosity and kindness of the unfortunate in direct contrast to the behaviour of many of his wealthy, socially select characters. A typical example is the poor postilion in Joseph Andrews who gives his coat to Joseph who is lying naked and beaten in a ditch, after all the wealthy passengers on the coach have refused, with a fine display of outraged virtue, to help him in any way. Later in the same novel, Joseph and Parson Adams are relieved from economic difficulty



by a travelling pedlar, having again been refused help by more wealthy people. 'Thus', writes Fielding, underlining his meaning, 'these poor people, who could not engage the compassion of riches and piety were at length relieved out of their distress by the charity of a poor pedlar'.<sup>9</sup>

However, despite Fielding's undoubted sincerity, lower-class characters like the postilion and the pedlar are always viewed from a distance; they are never endowed with much individuality, let alone complexity. This is more a matter of the way Fielding sees his authorial role than the result of any artistic discrimination against low characters as such. His viewpoint as novelist is essentially that of a detached, slightly cynical man of the world, who observes, from an aristocratic distance, the foibles and weaknesses of lesser mortals without in any way becoming emotionally involved himself. Thus he is always outside his characters, no matter what their social standing, and we view them through the cool, sophisticated eyes of their creator. This authorial distance creates most of the comedy and ironic enjoyment of his fiction, but inevitably it fails to create the sense of immediacy and complex individuality required for social realism. There is a scene in Tom Jones in which Tom's village sweetheart, Molly, gets involved in a fight with other women of the village. Fielding, like Dickens in similar incidents in his novels, describes the events with obvious zest and without moralizing over the combatants' low

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Andrews, I, 186-7.



brutality. But for all his obvious enjoyment, the mock heroic language used maintains a balanced poise and authorial distance. In fact, the humour of the passage derives from the discrepancy between the grandiose descriptions and the ridiculous nature of the incidents themselves, so that when it becomes necessary to move in close to the action, giving the actual words of one of the women, the conflicting requirements of the mock heroic stance clash with the needs for realism and much of the humorous effect is weakened.

Part of Dickens's 'bold innovation' is to eliminate this distance between author and subject in his presentation of low life and allow the humour to spring from the actual social situation itself. At the beginning of The Pickwick Papers, Mr Pickwick becomes entangled with an outraged cab-driver who has interpreted Pickwick's amateur scientific interest in the tenacity of his horse as busybodying officialdom. All the absurd comedy of the incident derives directly from the reality of its social context; from the inevitable completely mutual incomprehension of two individuals looking at the same situation from opposing social viewpoints. In the physical and verbal exchanges which follow the misunderstanding neither character is used more than the other as a butt for the comedy. Irony, if there is any, plays equally upon both men, and once the situation gets under way Dickens allows the combatants full dramatic play with the very minimum of authorial notation. The background chorus of the quickly gathering crowd, with

its willingness to participate in a punch-up and ready hostility towards government spies or officials, creates a solidly specific social setting, while the subtle tonal variations of the individual voices reveal the accuracy of Dickens's ear for the finest social distinctions in speech. Unlike the language of Fielding's village women, the speech in this scene enriches the comedy by its ability to suggest a whole range of social attitudes within the compass of short staccato sentences. Mr Pickwick's outraged, slightly archaic, euphemistic threat 'You shall smart for this', the pieman's bluntly colloquial directness, 'Put 'em under the pump', and Jingle's rather racy modern slang, 'What's the fun', chime against each other with the direct authenticity of fully experienced social interchange.<sup>10</sup> Dickens's intuitive sense of the complexity of social relationships, exploited here for comic effect, is conveyed with such little fuss, by such swiftly accurate notation of detail, that it is very easy to overlook his achievement in conveying this sense of intense reality which is the foundation of all his writing, however comic, bizarre, fantastic or symbolic it may appear to be. His wildest flights of fancy spring always from this sense of the real material world of human experience.

The innovatory nature of this achievement becomes more obvious if one compares the incident from Pickwick Papers just considered with a similar one in Peregrine Pickle by

<sup>10</sup> P.P., pp. 8-9.

Smollett. On this occasion the hero, Peregrine, enlists the help of his servant Pipes in punishing two chairmen who have demanded more than their rightful fare. Pipes duly dresses as a gentleman, concealing under his clothing a hundred pound weight and hires the men to carry him two miles. The predictable result is that they grow irritable under the burden, accuse each other of slacking and finally fall to blows, each 'being beaten almost to a jelly' by the other while Peregrine laughs at a safe distance.<sup>11</sup> Obviously any comedy deriving from this situation depends upon our remaining uninvolved with the chairmen. Any sense of them as actual individuals, or of the real social relationships existing between a rich, idle young man like Peregrine and men earning their living by such strenuous means would completely destroy the fun of crude revenge.

Smollett's novels contain none of Fielding's compassion or regard for poor characters. The lack of concern for the chairmen as individuals is typical of the contempt shown by him towards lower-class characters in most of his fiction. However, Smollett also lacks Fielding's superb artistic poise and is less in control of his material. This apparent weakness allows for certain surprising moments in his novels when characters who are usually treated with the cavalier disregard Smollett reserves for almost all but his heroes, break through the hard surface prose in voices of assertive emotional honesty, strangely at variance with the brittle

<sup>11</sup> Peregrine Pickle, p. 577.



picaresque mode of the rest of the writing. Such a moment occurs in Roderick Random when Strap, the long-abused servant, is finally stung by the hero's contemptuous treatment into a passionate declaration of his own feelings and worth:

'To be sure, Mr Random, you are born a gentleman, and have a great deal of learning - and indeed look like a gentleman ... On the other hand, I am a poor but honest cobbler's son - my mother was as industrious a woman as ever broke bread, till such time as she took to drinking ... but everyone has failings - humanum est errare. Now, for myself, I am a poor journeyman barber, tolerably well made, and understand some Latin, and have a smattering of Greek - but what of that? perhaps I might also say I know a little of the world - but that is to no purpose - though you be gentle and I simple, it does not follow but I who am simple may do a good office to you who are gentle'. 12

Literary influences nearly always remain merely speculation, but undoubtedly one of Dickens's most characteristic devices for closing the gap between the victimized poor in his novels and his readers is to allow them to testify directly in urgent, passionate speech to the immediacy of their suffering. Characters like Nancy in Oliver Twist, Hugh in Barnaby Rudge, Alice Marwood in Dombey and most powerfully Magwitch in Great Expectations all break through the rather melodramatic or stilted prose of their normal utterances to a cry of authentic individuality.

With the possibility of this single exception, Dickens's treatment of scenes and characters of what was termed low life is as innovatory as Gissing claims. New, both in the almost complete elimination of authorial distance in the

<sup>12</sup> Roderick Random, Everyman's Library (London, 1927), p. 101.

dramatic unfolding of incident, and in the total immersion of the situation in complex social reality. What Dickens preserves from the eighteenth-century novelists is their broad social sweep - Lady Betty and Moll Flanders, pickpocket, chatting familiarly on the London Street - and a quality less easy to define and more difficult to illustrate by quotation or example. This is the sense these novelists have of the vigour, energy and spontaneity of life, which they convey largely by the open framework of their narrative structures. At a crossroads, round a corner, by an inn fireside, at a polite soirée, something is always bound to happen in an eighteenth-century novel, a stranger or long-lost friend suddenly appears, insults are exchanged, assignations made, offers thrown down, which whirl up the narrative direction to the next intervention, collision or coincidence. The lack of physical restriction as to the setting of the picaresque novel is matched by its boundless energy of narrative invention and its uninhibited social world, where thought and feeling find direct expression in action.

Although Goldsmith was one of Dickens's favourite writers, The Vicar of Wakefield (1766) marks the beginning of a shift of the centre of action in the novel away from the city streets, with their vigorous life and open possibility for social interchange, to the confinement of the upper-middle-class drawing-room. With this change of locale the working class are effectively excluded from the work. In the novels of Fanny Burney and Jane Austen, for



example, even the existence of servants is largely ignored. It is striking to compare the easy intimacy of fictional eighteenth-century servants with their superiors to the anonymity of servants in later novels, despite the fact that the nineteenth century saw an astounding increase in servant numbers.<sup>13</sup> This sudden absence of individualized servants denotes not a loss of interest in the subject, but a growing loss of confidence in the old relations between the different social classes.<sup>14</sup> The narrowing down of the social range depicted in the novel probably reflects the growing rigidity of class boundaries in the real world, and it is noticeable that when the social problem novelists in the 1840's and 1850's wish to examine class interaction, the meetings they describe in their stories are usually contrived and awkward. Dickens remains an exception because he alone retains the broad social vista of the picaresque tradition, and even in his final novels, the streets, with their bustling social variety, remain important as centres of action.

<sup>13</sup> John Burnett gives a useful account of this increase, connecting it to the growing economic and social importance of the middle class. He writes, 'Thus, the growth of domestic service mirrors and reflects the growth of middle-class, mid-Victorian family pattern'. Useful Toil, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1977), p. 136.

<sup>14</sup> For an interesting discussion of what he calls the 'complex and ambiguous' relationship between the middle class and their servants see J.F.C. Harrison, The Early Victorians 1832-51, pp. 136-8.



Another effect of the movement indoors is the loss of that extroverted energy which marks the behaviour of most of the characters in the earlier novels. Feeling and response are no longer expressed directly in action. Within the polite drawing-room world, emotion is masked by conformity to accepted modes of behaviour and rituals of etiquette, and strong passions of any kind are hidden rather than revealed. Thus the novel finds a new form and becomes, in all senses, a study of the interior. What is required from the author is not the ability to convey meaning through the immediacy of action, speech or gesture, but indirectly through careful, painstaking analysis of the hidden recesses of a character's soul. It is the private world not the public which demands attention. This individualistic view of the novel's purpose gives rise to, and is in turn fed by, the kind of novels written by George Eliot and later Henry James. James himself expounds this changed emphasis in fictional aim most clearly in the preface to Portrait of a Lady in which he claims the chapter describing Isabel Archer's motionless brooding by a dying fire over the spoiled possibilities of her life to be 'obviously the best thing in the book' as exciting as 'the surprise of a caravan or the identification of a pirate'.<sup>15</sup> This growing emphasis upon the suffering soul behind the smiling, genteel exterior inevitably lessened the regard for Dickens's social immediacy and directly dramatic art. His innovation in social realism

<sup>15</sup> Portrait of a Lady, Bodley Head edition, 11 vols (London, 1968), V, 28.

came to seem anything but real; the spontaneity of his characters only indicative of a shallow exploitation of surface effect rather than an understanding of the depths within. Gentility had become an unmistakable sign of sensibility, as one of his later reviewers explained:

The most successful characters in Hard Times, as is usual with Mr Dickens are those which are the simplest and least cultivated. ... Original and picturesque characters are ... much more common among the poorer orders; their actions are simpler, proceeding from simpler motives, and they are principally to be studied from without. On the other hand, the characters of more cultivated persons, though more uniform in appearance, are in reality much more complex and various; and both these circumstances tend to render their study, for the purposes of representation, more difficult. Beneath the apparent uniformity lurk thousand-fold shades of difference, 16 indicative of the mind within.

By the end of Dickens's life it was George Eliot who was judged to be the one great novelist able to combine a meticulous accuracy of surface detail with an understanding of psychological character by showing its dependent relationship to social conditioning. The portrait of Dolly Winthrop in Silas Marner, for example, is a careful and sympathetic study of a working-class woman, undoubtedly treated with the artistic seriousness needed to convey a sense of the complexity of a real personality. The tried strength of Dolly's goodness and resilience in meeting the inevitable tribulations of life - 'the bad sicknesses and the hard dying' - rest, with absolute security, upon George Eliot's ability to create a full sense of the traditional

16 Westminster Review, October, 1854, n.s.vi, in The Critical Heritage, pp. 306-7.



rural community to which Dolly belongs, and from which she derives her deeply-rooted fatalism and conservatism.<sup>17</sup> In the almost liturgical rhythms of her speech George Eliot suggests not only the immemorial, passive wisdom of life lived in unreflecting closeness to the natural rhythm of seasons and yearly cycles, but also the reserves of endurance which are fortified by a simple unquestioning faith in power and authority above and beyond the understanding of humble minds:

'Ah', said Dolly with soothing gravity, 'it's like the night and the morning, and the sleeping and the waking, and the rain and the harvest - one goes and the other comes, and we know nothing how nor where. We may strive and scrat and fend, but it's little we can do arter all - the big things come and go wi' no<sup>18</sup> striving o' our'n'.

Doubtless it was deeply-felt passages such as this which led an early reviewer of Silas Marner to draw a comparison with the work of Dickens which by no means flattered the latter. 'Dickens', he writes, 'invest[s] each person with one distinguishing peculiarity' thus making the whole group 'artificial and mechanical', but George Eliot 'goes far beyond this ... We know that these poor are like real poor people'.<sup>19</sup> Dolly is probably the fullest and most sympathetic picture George Eliot creates of an ordinary working-class character and it is no accident that she represents the highest values of a traditional, conservative way of life,

<sup>17</sup> Silas Marner, Library edition (Edinburgh, 1901), p. 114.

<sup>18</sup> Silas Marner, p. 163. .

<sup>19</sup> The Saturday Review, 11, 13 April 1861, pp. 369-70, in A Century of George Eliot Criticism, edited by Gordon S. Haight (London, 1966), p. 15.



or that she inhabits a novel which is more accurately described as fable-like than realistic. There is in George Eliot a deep instinctive distrust both of city life and of the social unpredictability of its urban population.<sup>20</sup> It is typical that the story of Silas Marner details the weaver's gradual absorption into the community of Raveloe; his oddity and eccentricity finally smoothed into the pattern of homogeneity as he accepts the values and rituals of village life. There is not the slightest flow in the opposite direction. Silas's experiences of town life bring no widening of village horizons, no shift in attitudes, no loosening of tradition. The inertia of habitual forms and time-honoured ways of thinking and doing simply lap over and erase his past identity.

Dickens also creates a portrait of a good, ordinary working-class woman in the person of Polly Toodle in Dombey and Son. Polly, like Dolly Winthrop, is depicted as a proud and caring mother, a loving wife, patient and enduring through troubles, and with that inner fortitude which makes her instinctively sought out by others in times of sickness and distress. The reason they seem such differently conceived characters is that Polly is always active and innovative in her attitude to life without any of Dolly's

<sup>20</sup> Felix Holt is expressing his author's own misgivings when he likens the working class to Caliban, ready to 'worship every Trinculo that carries a bottle'. Felix Holt, Library edition. (Edinburgh, 1901), p. 272.

grave passivity. Polly accepts the economic dependence of her family on rich employers like Mr Dombey but her lack of belief in the divine ordering of social divisions allows her to insist that if Dombey does not like her real name he must pay to call her by another - a piece of undeferential independence unthinkable in Dolly Winthrop. Polly's quick and active wit also enables her to offer positive comfort to Florence Dombey in her lonely grief for her dead mother. Her innovative and imaginative description of death reaches beyond the scope of Dolly's quietism in its sensitive response to the child's needs:

'No! The warm ground,' returned Polly, seizing her advantage, 'where the ugly little seeds turn into beautiful flowers, and into grass, and corn, and I don't know what all besides. Where good people turn into bright angels, and fly away to Heaven!' 21

Dolly's instinctive submissiveness to the wisdom of the Almighty would have prevented her from taking these kinds of creative liberties with accepted theology and of assuming the right to knowledge which properly belongs only to the parson and the educated. As she says, 'There's wise folks, happen, as know how it all is; the parson knows, I'll be bound; but it takes big words to tell them things, and such as poor folks can't make much out on'.<sup>22</sup> Polly, however, does not stop at providing this comfort for Florence, but, upon discovering the cold relationship existing between Mr Dombey and his daughter, she sets about actively to improve

21 D.S., p. 24.

22 Silas Marner, p. 190.



matters. Dolly Winthrop undoubtedly has deep reserves of stoical courage, but Polly Toodle has this and something more - an active courage which asserts itself not just in comforting the suffering, but in striving, however humbly, to change the world for the better. Ultimately the difference between the two characters comes down to a difference in attitude to working-class people generally by their respective authors. Both are full of admiration and sympathy for the good, humble character they present, but only Dickens believes that even those as lowly and untutored as Polly can be an active power in the world.

At times George Eliot's concern for social realism threatens to become a trap for her characters, making them seem too predictable and passive. There is a give-away phrase in her own criticism of Dickens quoted earlier, in which she speaks of 'the miserable fallacy' that any virtue can arise from bad social conditions. This implies a refusal to accept certain actualities which is as limiting to serious fiction as the faults she castigates. John Bayley has pointed to the potential weakness of her painstaking, all-embracing unification of determining social context with inherent personality:

The inner life is seen, accumulated, and reconstructed like the interior of Silas Marner's cottage ... It is precisely her strength that she can do this, but we are not to consider her folk as living among the contingencies of the non-pastoral world any more than we are to consider their minds not being open ... to an accurate and painstaking scrutiny. Human motivation, like human history, is a matter of laborious but essentially feasible reconstruction. 23

23 'The Pastoral of Intellect' in Critical Essays on George Eliot, edited by Barbara Hardy (London, 1970), p. 206.



At times the heavy weight of such determinism gives a sense of flatness to George Eliot's writing - her characters are too well known, held too tightly and possessively within the grip of her intellect. There are no dark avenues beckoning the reader's own explorations. For this reason Bayley challenges Leavis's comparison of her sense of rural life with Shakespeare's:

Nothing could be less like Shakespearian dialogue than that rustic perfection of the Poyzers, in which every confirming touch rings just too typical to be true. By contrast, the speech of Shallow, Dogberry or Bottom, of Doll Tearsheet and Mistress Overdone shoots off into peculiarity and contingency: it continually suggests the presence of a world elsewhere, of an uninsulated oddity that is outside the immediate scope 24 of artful presentation.

Part of the continual excitement of reading Dickens is that his characters too 'shoot off into peculiarity and contingency' and none more so than those of working-class origin. Sam Weller, Sairey Gamp, Polly Toodle, Peggotty, Mrs Plornish and Rogue Riderhood all grow out of a fully realized social environment and cannot be understood in its absence, but it can never totally explain them. Unlike Dolly Winthrop, they are not passive creatures, moulded entirely by their social world. Their behaviour, speech, thought and gestures are coloured through and through with the shading of their social experience, yet they are seen also as active forces impressing their shape upon circumstances, escaping continually into the freedom of unpredictability, and retaining within themselves the dynamic energy of change.

It is this perception of the working class as endowed with active force which separates Dickens's depictions of them from those of just about all of his contemporaries; even from such different but intense sympathizers with the poor as Thomas Carlyle and Frederick Engels. There is a sentence near the beginning of Sartor Resartus which conveniently summarizes Carlyle's social attitudes. The hero Teufelsdröckh describes how he is able to watch all the life of the city from his vantage point high up on an attic floor. 'From the palace esplanade, where music plays while Serene Highness is pleased to eat his victuals, down to the low lane, where in her door-sill the aged widow, knitting for a thin livelihood, sits to feel the afternoon sun, I see it all'.<sup>25</sup> The mockery in the voice which refers to Serene Highness, and the contrasting kindness which describes the poor widow are accurate keynotes to the nature of Carlyle's response to wealth and poverty, sounded here early in his work and remaining unchanged for the greater part of his career, at least. However, although he thus seems to espouse the broad social inclusiveness which Dickens inherited from the eighteenth-century novelists, he actually avoids contact with any unpredictable activity or spontaneous social interaction. Teufelsdröckh never becomes involved in the life of the city which he watches from above with feelings which seem to hint at fear and distaste:

<sup>25</sup> Sartor Resartus, (London, 1896), p. 15.



All these heaped and huddled together, with nothing but a little carpentry and masonry between them; - crammed in, like salted fish in their barrel; - or weltering, shall I say, like an Egyptian pitcher of tamed vipers, each struggling to get its head above the others: such work goes on under that smoke-counterpane. - But I, mein Werther, sit above it all;<sup>26</sup> I am alone with the Stars.

Carlyle, like his early hero, prefers the distant view from the tower, and this lack of closeness to his subject allows him to create an idealized myth of the working class as comprising ox-strong, silent men, only desiring to serve some good master with all their great strength and loyal hearts. The popular support for Chartism can then be interpreted as, 'bellowings, inarticulate cries of a dumb creature in rage and pain; to the ear of wisdom they are inarticulate prayers: "Guide me, govern me! I am mad and miserable, and cannot guide myself!"'.<sup>27</sup> Dickens's own response to Chartist agitation was ambiguous to say the least, but the image of the working class evoked by his fiction is far more serious and complex than Carlyle's inarticulate feudal creatures crying out for control and guidance. It is those writers who convey such totally passive images of the working class in their writing that bring 'political comfort' to the middle class, not Dickens, as John Carey asserts. Dickens, unlike Teufelsdröckh, stays resolutely down in the life of the streets, immersed and at times shaken by the immediacy of the human experience it thrusts upon his artistic vision - an experience too active

<sup>26</sup> Sartor Resartus, p. 17.

<sup>27</sup> Chartism, in Selected Essays (London, 1972), p. 199.



and forceful to be always comfortable and without threat. This special relationship Dickens felt with London streets needs no stressing. In the autobiographical part of David Copperfield he describes his unhappy lounging in obscure streets as a young child as 'making his imaginative world out of such strange experiences and sordid things'.<sup>28</sup> As an author he remains true to these sources and when he does retreat from the streets in his novels, he is nearly always retreating from his commitment to reality.

Unlike Carlyle, Engels' interpretation of Chartism gives a much more active role to its mass of working-class supporters, and Engels also boasts of his close familiarity with the city streets and environs. 'I wanted more than a mere abstract knowledge of my subject,' he writes, 'I wanted to see you in your own homes, to observe you in your everyday life, to chat with you on your conditions and grievances'.<sup>29</sup> Despite this, only a limited sense of working-class life can be gained from The Condition of the Working Classes. The sheer weight of misery, poverty, oppression, disease and death squeezes out the possibility of other kinds of experience, which, even in grimmest Manchester, did not disappear altogether.<sup>30</sup> This unremitting emphasis on the intolerable conditions of working-class life, while undoubtedly true to the facts, produces something of the same effect as Carlyle's

<sup>28</sup> D.C., p. 169.

<sup>29</sup> Engels, p. 323.

<sup>30</sup> In this respect, Mrs Gaskell in Mary Barton gives a more balanced picture of working-class existence in an industrial city.

idealization; the individuals appear only as passive victims with little potential in themselves for taking an active, initiatory role in their own lives. This is obviously more serious for Engels's thesis than Carlyle's, since it is his intention to show the working class as an agent for social change. In his desire to emphasize the many just causes of their grievances against other sections of society, Engels minimizes their resilience and energy. By so doing he leaves himself somewhat open to the criticism that his statements about the future triumphs of the working class sound like the empty optimism of an unrealistic idealist. Again Dickens's imaginative closeness to the actuality of working-class experience prevents him from drifting into this kind of unreality.

Engels writes of the London rookery, St Giles, 'there is quite as much life as in the great thoroughfares of the town, except that, here, people of the working class only are to be seen'.<sup>31</sup> In the description which follows, however, the people are not seen, only the rotten vegetables, the crumbling walls, and the 'stinking pools' of 'foul liquid'.<sup>32</sup> Dickens notices similar unwholesome sights whenever he visits Seven Dials, another notorious London slum, but it is on the people who live there that he focuses attention. In one such small scene in Sketches by Boz, the introductory remarks denote a certain ironic detachment between author

<sup>31</sup> Engels, p. 61.

<sup>32</sup> Engels, p. 61.



and subject, although whether the use of mock-genteel terms like 'ladies' and 'domestic arrangement' indicates quite the kind of supercilious contempt claimed by Carey seems highly questionable.<sup>33</sup> What is certain is that once the incident, a quarrel among a group of wives, gets under way such issues are pushed into irrelevance by the dramatic force of the characters themselves. Although their speech is thick with the particularity of their lives, it has an inventive energy and aggressive peculiarity which simply demands acceptance on its own terms. Only Dickens and Shakespeare are able to allow this kind of anarchic artistic freedom to their characters, and for this reason their conscious attitudes matter less than those of writers like George Eliot whose characters remain within the grip of their intellects. At his best, Dickens's own personality is negated by the imaginative force of his artistic sympathy, and his characters, like Shakespeare's, speak for themselves:

'Matter!' replies the first speaker, talking at the obnoxious combatant, 'matter! Here's poor dear Mrs. Sulliwin, as has five blessed children of her own, can't go out a-charing for one arternoon, but what hussies must be a-comin', and 'ticing away her own 'usband, as she's been married to twelve year come next Easter Monday, for I see the certificate ven I vas a-drinkin' a cup o' tea vith her, only the werry last blessed Ven'sday as ever vas sent. I appen'd to say promiscuously, 'Mrs. Sulliwin,' says I - 'What do you mean by hussies?' interrupts a champion of the other party ... 'Niver mind', replies the opposition expressively, 'niver mind; you go home, and, ven you're quite sober,<sup>34</sup> mend your stockings.'

33 S.B., p. 70.

34 S.B., p. 70.



The unlikely, but superbly down-to-earth concluding taunt clinches our sense of the authenticity of this exchange as surely as it clinches the argument itself. Dickens does not idealize these women, any more than he condescends to them or pities them - he simply presents them with an urgent and compulsively dramatic art which makes critical demands, like those of Sheila Smith, for seriousness and complexity, difficult to place. However, if seriousness is not synonymous with solemnity (which some critics, and even some novelists, seem to feel is the only appropriate mode in which to depict the working class) then scenes like this, at the very beginning of Dickens's career, demonstrate a perceptive awareness of the complicated social relations and human diversity which make up working-class life. No other English nineteenth-century novelist conveys this life with such unfiltered intensity; its physical and material, down-to-earth concerns; its close-knit, emotional neighbourliness, productive of jealousy, quarrels and deceit, as well as sympathy and friendship, its aggressiveness and resilience of spirit, and, above all, its energetic and spontaneous transmission of feeling and passion into action, speech and gesture. These qualities form the basis of Dickens's presentation of working-class characters in all his novels, and the exploration of the significance he comes to attach to these, leads to the centre of his most serious artistic and social preoccupations.

If the simple accuracy of Dickens's mimetic realism needs any vindication one has only to turn to Henry Mayhew's

London Labour and the London Poor to find oneself suddenly in that large, gregarious, hyperactive world of Charles Dickens. Harland S. Nelson has pointed to Mayhew as a possible source for certain ideas and characters in Our Mutual Friend.<sup>35</sup> A good case could also be made for aspects of Bleak House, which Dickens wrote shortly after Mayhew's interviews appeared in the Morning Chronicle from October, 1849 to December, 1850.<sup>36</sup> However, the principal impression on reading London Labour is of just how little Dickens needed to invent at all when he wrote of the London working

35 'Dickens's Our Mutual Friend and Mayhew's London Labour and London Poor,' Nineteenth Century Fiction, XX, December, 1965, pp. 207-222.

36 In Bleak House a brickmaker sarcastically tells Mrs Pardiggle that churches are not the place for those like him. In London Labour, a scavenger uses strikingly similar words, and even has the same irritable manner of repeating his interlocutor's questions: 'I never goes to any church or chapel. Sometimes I hasn't clothes as is fit, and I s'pose I couldn't be admitted into sich fine places in my working dress. I was once in church, but felt queer ... and never went again. They're fittest for rich people. Yes, I've heerd about religion and about God Almighty. What religion have I heered on? Why the regular religion. I'm satisfied with what I knows and feels about it, and that's enough about it.' Even more striking in relation to Bleak House is the waste-paper dealer who tells Mayhew, 'I've often in my time "cleared out" a lawyer's office. I've bought old briefs, and other law papers ... You'll excuse me, sir, but I couldn't help thinking what a lot of misery was caused, perhaps, by the cwts. of waste I've bought at such places. If my father hadn't got mixed up with law he wouldn't have been ruined, and his children wouldn't have had such a hard fight of it; so I hate law'.  
London Labour and the London Poor, 4 vols (New York, 1968), II, 225, 113.



class. There are stories of pathos, self-sacrifice and enduring goodness amongst the most appalling conditions which far surpass any such incidents in Dickens's novels. There are also plenty of self-confessed villains, instinctive comedians and born storytellers, and on every page tricks of speech, idiosyncrasy of gesture, dress and manner which continually awaken echoes of working-class characters depicted by Dickens. The old sailor, for example, telling Mayhew of his wife, 'but her cable had run out, and she died, and I've been a poor forlorned creatur' ever since', inevitably reminds one of Barkis going out with the tide and of the forlorn Mrs Gummidge, or of Tony Weller describing the death of his wife in coaching terms.<sup>37</sup> Another man interviewed makes the kind of happy mistake between words that Dickens delights in, speaking of 'the inflammation' given by foreigners rather than information, and the gallery wits at the Vic Theatre who shout impatiently, 'Pull up that there winder blind!' are surely the very ones who torment poor Mr Wopsle in Great Expectations.<sup>38</sup>

Despite such examples, which could be proliferated indefinitely, it is in gaining a clearer perception of a very different dimension of Dickens's art that the comparison between his work and Mayhew's can be most useful. By an odd coincidence there is one character who appears in the work of both writers. One of Mayhew's longest recorded interviews

<sup>37</sup> Mayhew, I, 359-60.

<sup>38</sup> Mayhew, III, 60; I, 19.



is with a Punch and Judy showman and for little wonder, since the man has a marvellously entertaining manner of talking, full of sly jokes, fascinating information, and philosophical speculation about all aspects of his profession. One of the many incidents of his life which he relates is of how, needing to repair his puppets, he 'sat down under the tombs to stitch 'em up a bit, thinking no-one would vander us there. But Mr. Crookshank took us off there as we was a sitting. I know I'm the same party, 'cos Joe seen the print you know and draw'd quite nat'ral, as now in print, with the slumares a laying about on all the tombstones round us'.<sup>39</sup> Dickens must have been inspired by Cruickshank's print when he describes in The Old Curiosity Shop how Nell and her grandfather come upon Codlin and Short in the graveyard repairing their puppets since the novel was written in 1841, well before the Morning Chronicle articles appeared. Nevertheless, his description of their journey towards the races, the meeting of other travelling entertainers at a favourite inn, the trade jealousy underlying the bonhomie, and all the details of the performances they give find verification in the account given to Mayhew by the real man. Dickens's familiarity with the trade is astounding, but in his depiction of Codlin and Short and in their place within the context of the novel, he moves well beyond such factual documentation. In the seemingly comic and unlikely partnership of Codlin and Short, Dickens

<sup>39</sup> Mayhew, III, 48.

dramatizes the conflict of personality imposed by the need to impersonate daily the jovial, devil-may-care Mr Punch while keeping a necessarily hard-headed attention on the business of collecting enough pennies by which to live. While Mr Punch poses as a friend of the poor in his defiance of the beadle and Jack Ketch, his master must always be prepared to curtail a performance to them if a wealthy patron asks for a private show. Beneath all his geniality Mayhew's performer betrays a hard core of realism:

Soldiers again, we don't like, they've got no money - no not even so much as pockets, sir. Nusses ain't no good. Even if the mothers of the dear little children has given 'em a penny to spend, why the nusses takes it from 'em and keeps it for ribbins. <sup>40</sup>

If one hears a slightly sinister note behind that phrase 'the dear little children' it is largely due to the kind of imaginative insights created by Dickens's art. These he presents always dramatically, as acted out in behaviour, not as secret information to which only an omniscient author has access. In the characters of Codlin and Short a split personality becomes two actual people; the convivial, benevolent man and the hard-faced economic man. Short seems to have all the affability and friendliness of the creature he impersonates, while Codlin is the realist, totally sceptical of disinterested human virtues like generosity or kindness, out for number one and self-preservation only. However, their differences are only those of appearance - of the public figure Punch as opposed to the private individual

<sup>40</sup> Mayhew, III, 47.

Codlin - for underneath they are one in greed and selfishness, and it is Short who first cunningly schemes to make money out of Nell, and who rouses them early at the inn in order to outwit the other performers on the road.

By themselves Codlin and Short would remain interesting as characters depicting psychological conflict in dramatic form. Placed within the context of a novel, whose main themes are the deceptiveness of appearance and the exploitation of innocence, their meaning is enriched and becomes more generalized in significance, although neither symbolism nor allegory seem quite satisfactory terms for this sense of added meaning. It is typical of Dickens's startling artistic invention that he should focus the novel's concern with the treachery of surface appearance onto characters who represent familiar, well-loved figures of childhood entertainment; the very discrepancy between the seemingly innocent and light-hearted nature of their employment and their secret scheming against a helpless child adding extra intensity to their sinister suggestion of evil. Codlin's reiterated 'Codlin's the friend remember - not Short' contains an obsessive note of menace, all the more unpleasant for its outward assurance of friendship.<sup>41</sup> Once these two men meet up with their other performing colleagues at the Jolly Sandboys the imaginative pitch of the writing becomes ever more intense until the company is transformed into a luridly surrealistic vision of an inhuman society composed

<sup>41</sup> O.C.S., p. 145.



of spiteful, aged dwarfs, exploited and crippled giants hidden from public view, degraded, performing dogs howling for their supper, and everywhere the motives of greed and dishonesty in control. Such seemingly fantastic, and yet at the same time powerfully impressive writing, is one of the most striking characteristics of Dickens's fictional style. Starting always from a surely perceived base in ordinary experience, Dickens's imagination at such moments leaps towards a heightened effect which borders upon the incredible, but which produces an image or vision which suggests, in a non-logical, intuitive way, some underlying truth about human experience or existence. Robert Garis has analysed one such intensely imagined moment in Oliver Twist; it is that movement into Fagin's mind during his trial which, according to Garis, amounts to clairvoyance on Dickens's part:

Moreover, so beautiful is the passage, so right does it seem, that it amounts to a momentary repudiation of the traditional assumptions and practices of serious art. It occurs to us that whereas George Eliot might at this juncture have implicated us in a serious, and convincing, inner drama of remorse and fear, Dickens's guess about Fagin's state of mind seems at once more truthful and more generous to Fagin. This, we feel, is the work of a sympathetic imagination totally uninhibited by conventional expectations and therefore uninterested in dominating 42 reality by those expectations.

Garis is wrong to depreciate Dickens's achievement here by using the word 'guess'. In fact, the frequent independence of his writing from the kind of deductive reasoning employed by more rational writers like, for example, George

42 The Dickens Theatre (Oxford, 1965), p. 60.

Eliot; its total freedom from 'conventional expectations' is the hallmark of Dickens's creative genius, and the source of authority behind the many assertions in his fiction of the superior wisdom of fancy over rationality. This kind of daring leap of artistic imagination probably accounts for most of the really great moments in literature, but Dickens more than any other writer makes the technique his own. This imaginative audacity is what belies the strong reality of his writing, but in fact his bold pushes against the barrier of logical connections are, like the figures of Codlin and Short, always based upon a close sense of the stuff of everyday life.

Dickens may well be describing an example of this instinctive creative impulse in Our Mutual Friend. Mr Boffin is explaining to Bella his acting of the role of miser and especially his outburst 'Mew says the cat, etc.', when Rokesmith declares his love for her.

'Never thought of it afore the moment, my dear!' he observed to Bella. 'When John said, if he had been so happy as to win your affections and possess your heart, it come into my head to turn round upon him with 'Win her affections and possess her heart! Mew says the cat, Quack-quack says the duck, and Bow-wow-wow says the dog.' I couldn't tell you how it come into my head or where from, but it had so much the sound of a rasper that I own to you it astonished myself.' 43

Boffin is perhaps a slightly cruder artist than his author, but his 'rasper' conveys exactly the sense of fatuous conventionality which he wishes to imply characterizes Rokesmith's protestations of love to Bella in order to gain



her money. Dickens's own words to Forster about the creation of the characters of Mrs Gamp and Pecksniff describe a similar process:

As to the way in which these characters have opened out, that is to me one of the most surprising processes of the mind in this sort of invention. Given what one knows, what one does not know springs up; and I am as absolutely certain of its being true, as I am of the law of gravitation - if such a thing 44  
be possible, more so.

This 'springing-up' of the unknown out of the known is surely what happens in the marvellous scene where Betsey Prig challenges the authenticity of Mrs Harris. It seems, as we read, the only possible climax to this jealous professional friendship, and yet, at the same time, dazzles us with the sheer audacity of its inventiveness. The deliberately prominent exposure of a fictitious character, in what is after all a totally fictitious world, defies the reader to declare, like Alice, that it is all a pack of cards anyway.<sup>45</sup> But, of course, at no other point in the novel is any reader less likely to do so. The importance of Mrs Harris for Sairey could only be focused through her potential destruction by Betsey. Comedy and fantasy here lead into a penetrating psychological insight.

44 Forster, I, 295-6.

45 John Lucas makes a similar point about the 'audacity of Dickens's imagination' in discussing the powerful scene in Oliver Twist, where an old pauper woman declares her daughter's death to be 'as good as a play'. The effect, says Lucas, is 'entirely new to the English novel. Its radical quality does not lie in its exactness of social detail', but in its 'terrific imaginative insight'. The Melancholy Man, second edition (Sussex, 1980), pp. 46-7.



The use of a metaphor suggestive of a liberating upward movement, used by Dickens himself to describe the imaginative process which creates his greatest effects, seems apposite. Throughout his novels he returns to such imagery to suggest the ideas of imaginative inspiration, moral idealism and individual aspiration which, he believes, all share a common source in fancy. Freedom from restrictions in all these contexts is expressed by metaphors of flight. John Carey also uses this kind of image when he wishes to describe one of the essential qualities of Dickens's writing. Commenting on Pip's wry admission, in Great Expectations, that the quantity of tar-water administered by his sister made him conscious of smelling like a new fence, Carey writes, 'The fanciful leap from boy to fence is so unexpected that it has the liberating power of a poetic image'.<sup>46</sup>

There is a case to be made that entire novels grow or 'spring up' from a single intense poetic image by which Dickens suddenly sees the whole nature of his world in an unexpected and revealing way - with the unknown unfolding from the known, so that even the smallest detail of the apparently sprawling whole is in fact part of a totally unified, all-embracing vision. It is certainly possible to read such complex novels as Bleak House in this closely interrelated way, but nevertheless such coherent, disciplined design allows freedom for frequent localized bursts of imaginative energy and exhilarating flights of comic fancy

<sup>46</sup> Carey, p. 72.

which belie the underlying control of a unified structure. Undoubtedly, the uninhibited responsiveness in speech and gesture, the lack of social conformity, and the free flow of passion he attributes to working-class characters cause them to be involved often in these seemingly anarchic moments in his novels. Orwell's well-known praise for the gargoyles and his disparagement of the architecture of Dickens's novels may miss the point that the freedom of expression allowed the gargoyles is deliberately intended to disrupt a potentially over-controlled structure with their vitality.<sup>47</sup> By these disruptive features Dickens creates the impression of a writer living on his wits, relying upon the spontaneous inventiveness of his fancy to dazzle his readers with a constant succession of brilliantly daring moments of dramatic art. The openness of the picaresque structure is in this way transformed into a much more deliberately artful form. For this sense of adventure and seeming lack of control have to be understood as part of the total meaning of Dickens's work, a central concern of which is the dialectical opposition between freedom and control, both in artistic creation and in the social areas of human life.

It is not his moments of artistic liberation, the upward flights of fancy, which cause us to doubt the authenticity of Dickens's art, but those rarer occasions when his imagination gets clogged down in what Garis calls 'conventional

<sup>47</sup> Collected Essays (London, 1961), p. 80.

expectations'. Such submission to conventionality is what produces the dull, unlikely virtue of so many of Dickens's genteel young ladies. In contrast to these, scenes like that in the Jolly Sandboys, or Sairey's quarrel with Betsey Prig, or young Pip's last glimpse of Magwitch limping off across the marshes, impress with the sense that it must inevitably be so, that nothing else that Dickens could have written could possibly be so true. Yet at the same time the passages strike us with the shock of the unexpected, reaching towards areas of understanding we can respond to, but not fully explain.

Despite the imaginative and symbolic mode of much of this writing, it would be quite wrong to depict the novels as self-referential entities unconnected with any non-fictional reality beyond the text. Often the most poetically charged moments are those in which Dickens is exploring most sharply some aspect of his real world. The depiction of the working-class characters is a case in point. Frequently they are connected to his most anarchic and surrealistic flights of fancy, but the freedom they thus allow him is based firmly in his perception of real lives and experience. Indeed, some of the sense of strangeness is caused by the fact that Dickens breaks away from the usual reified literary image of the working class as passive victims; in the best of his writing they are always active figures, the complex social basis of their personalities providing a spring-board for idiosyncratic freedom, not a determining straitjacket. Their passions and feelings are translated directly into dramatic



behaviour and urgent speech, not suppressed in social conformity. The forceful vitality which typifies these characters is achieved by an energetic artistic immediacy, unrestricted by obvious authorial control. In the dramatic unfolding of social interaction Dickens has the negative capacity to submerge his own identity and allow that of his subjects liberty to follow their own artistic logic. When he fails with a character, as with Stephen Blackpool in Hard Times, for instance, it is because he remains trapped within conventional expectations, or is unable to reach any imaginative identification. As already mentioned in the previous chapter, industrial conflict called forth Dickens's most consciously responsible attitude towards his subject. Moreover, although he was deeply sympathetic towards northern mill workers, he could find no poetic liberation in the disciplined monotony of their existence and environment. As a novelist he needed the variety and open possibilities of the London streets, and his art reflects, in its form and content, all the unexpectedness, dramatic interchange and vitality they contain.

PART TWO

ACTIVITY: THE EARLY NOVELS

CHAPTER 3Pickwick Papers - Leapfrog with Life

'My friend,' said the thin gentleman.  
 'You're one o' the advice gratis order,' thought Sam,  
 'or you wouldn't be so werry fond o' me all at once.'  
 But he only said - 'Well sir.'  
 'My friend,' said the thin gentleman, with a  
 conciliatory hem - 'Have you got many people stopping  
 here, now? Pretty busy. Eh?'...  
 'Oh, werry well, sir,' replied Sam, 'we shan't be  
 bankrupts, and we shan't make our fort'ns. We eats  
 our biled mutton without capers, and don't care for  
 horse-radish ven ve can get beef.'  
 'Ah,' said the little man, 'you're a wag, a'nt you?'  
 'My eldest brother was troubled with that complaint,'  
 said Sam; 'it may be catching - I used to sleep<sup>1</sup>  
 with him.'

This exchange reveals the quintessential Sam Weller - sharp, cynical, caustic, with an irresistible urge to deflate, yet full of affable good-humour. Sam makes his appearance in the novel with all his rich individuality fully comprehended in Dickens's mind. That easy movement into his thoughts at the beginning of the quotation above is not repeated with any other character in the novel. There is an authorial closeness to Sam Weller which is denied even to Mr Pickwick. This is not to imply that those traits which Dickens depicts with such inner assurance have their origin in his fancy only. His most powerful imaginative inventions have their source always in a strong sense of the actual world. Tony Weller provides us with the vital clue to Sam's character

<sup>1</sup> P.P., p. 123.



when he tells Pickwick:

I took a great deal o' pains with his eddication, sir; let him run in the streets when he was werry young, and shift for his-self. It's the only way <sup>2</sup> to make a boy sharp sir.'

Tony is right - all Sam Weller's strengths and weaknesses can be understood in terms of the interplay between his naturally buoyant personality and the harsh education of the London streets. Sam is only one of a number of such characters whose activities make a very large contribution indeed to the sparkling vitality of Dickens's early novels - the Artful Dodger and Charley Bates in Oliver Twist, the wild boy who defies Quilp in The Old Curiosity Shop, Young Bailey in Martin Chuzzlewit, and Trabb's boy, a sudden late reappearance in Great Expectations, are all, like Sam, typical street urchins. The frequent occurrence of this type and the surge of imaginative vitality which characterizes Dickens's writing whenever he turns to them, suggest that they possess qualities which are important to him as a novelist, and perhaps personally, especially in the early part of his career.

All these characters are typified by their sharpness. It is the defining trait of the urchin, at once his guarantee of survival and his source of self-respect. Mayhew, in London Labour, corroborates Tony Weller: 'The education of these children', he writes, 'is such as only the streets afford; and the streets teach them for the most part - and in greater or lesser degrees - acuteness - a precocious acuteness'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> P.P., p. 271.

<sup>3</sup> Mayhew, I, 24.

One informant tells him, 'these young ones are as sharp as terriers, and learns every dodge of business in less of half of no time. There's one I knows about three feet high, that's up to the business as clever as a man of thirty. Though he's only twelve years old he'll chaff down a peeler so uncommon severe, that the only way to stop him is to take him in charge'.<sup>4</sup> Such precocity aptly describes Young Bailey, in Martin Chuzzlewit, who bemuses innocent Poll Sweedlepipe with his flash city manner and 'precocious self-possession' as he 'walked along the tangible and real stones of Holborn Hill, an under-sized boy; and yet he winked the winks, and thought the thoughts, and did the deeds, and said the sayings of an ancient man'.<sup>5</sup> The Artful Dodger too, may be 'as dirty a juvenile as one could wish to see, but he had about him all the airs and manners of a man'.<sup>6</sup>

The urchin's pride in being a sharp character, dramatized in his flash appearance, witty slang and air of cynical amusement, gives a zest to everyday life. Ordinary incidents become a challenge to his wits and mischievous invention, and other people, all too often, are seen as potential victims to be outsmarted, although this with a kind of high-spirited glee rather than any feelings of malice. Just as Sam, in the quotation above, feels it due to his self-respect to confuse Mr Perker, although he has nothing against him

<sup>4</sup> Mayhew, I, 35.

<sup>5</sup> M.C., p. 422.

<sup>6</sup> O.T., p. 53.

personally, so Trabb's boy is summed up by Pip in Great Expectations:

Not that Trabb's boy was of a malignant nature, but that he had too much spare vivacity, and that it was in his constitution to want variety and excitement at anybody's expense. 7

The 'spare vivacity' of the London working class was well-known in Dickens's time. A ballad celebrating the opening of the Birmingham to London railway in 1838 warns the Birmingham lads, 'So reckon on sport when the Cockneys come down,/For they're all very flash from the fop to the clown'.<sup>8</sup>

This pride in sharpness, in being a flash character, was not only enjoyed by the urchins themselves. The reflected rays of their glory, especially their ability to 'chaff a peeler uncommon severe', were felt by most of the working class to increase their general status. At least some among their number could hold their own against the forces of authority which seemed, from below, equally arbitrary and oppressive. Mayhew admits that even to boys from respectable working-class homes, 'the young street ruffian is a hero'.<sup>9</sup> Dickens captures the importance attached to a reputation for sharpness in Tony Weller's righteous indignation at his son for allowing Job Trotter to make a fool of him:

<sup>7</sup> G.E., p. 410.

<sup>8</sup> A Touch of the Times, edited by Roy Palmer (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1974), p. 50.

<sup>9</sup> Mayhew, I, 468.



'Ought to ha' know'd better!' repeated Mr Weller, striking the table with his fist. 'Ought to ha' know'd better! why, I know a young 'un as hasn't had half nor quarter your eddication - as hasn't slept about the markets, no, not six months - who'd ha' scorned to be let in, in such a vay: scorned it, Sammy.' 10

A similar sense of outraged betrayal is expressed by Charley Bates in Oliver Twist when he discovers the Dodger has been caught ingloriously on an insignificant charge.

The first requirement of sharpness is an unflappable self-confidence. No matter what happens, these city urchins in Dickens's novels never lose their air of calm self-possession, which would be the envy of Lord Chesterfield himself. On all occasions, but most spectacularly at his trial, the Artful Dodger maintains a posture of supreme superiority over his circumstances:

'Do you hear his worship ask if you've anything to say?' inquired the jailer, nudging the silent Dodger with his elbow.

'I beg your pardon,' said the Dodger, looking up with an air of abstraction. 'Did you redress yourself to me, my man?' 11

Sam Weller manifests a similar cool disdain at Pickwick's trial. He is as unperturbed by legal harassment as he is by Mr Perker's assumed cordiality. Indeed nothing at all surprises Sam. He has a 'countenance expressive of the most enviable and easy defiance of everything and everybody' and he encounters 'everything with a coolness which nothing could disturb'.<sup>12</sup> Undoubtedly Sam is right to place such

<sup>10</sup> P.P., pp. 314-5.

<sup>11</sup> O.T., p. 335.

<sup>12</sup> P.P., pp. 422, 779.

trust in his own sharp wits developed by that early education. His fund of city lore is prodigious. Not only is he familiar with all aspects of London life, but in Ipswich, Bath and Bristol he remains equally assured. When Mr Pickwick sends him on a seemingly impossible mission to find Mr Winkle in the unknown city of Bath, Sam tells him, 'Oh, I'll find him if he's any vere', and of course he does.<sup>13</sup> Sam Weller has an anecdote to suit every occasion and even his habit of making bizarre comparisons suggests a huge and varied fund of experience. The same knowledgeable shrewdness informs his judgement of people. Those who have to shift for themselves soon learn to perceive the motives of others. He sees with ease through the snobbish pretensions of the servants at Bath, the legal avarice of Dodson and Fogg, and the sham ferocity of Mr Dowler.

This cynical, worldly stance of the urchin is the outward manifestation of a tremendous resilience. In those that survive, the streets breed toughness of spirit. When Tony Weller boasts to Mr Pickwick of the education he has provided for his son, he neglects to mention those who cannot keep afloat in such a harsh world - those like Nancy, Jo the crossing-sweeper, and Magwitch, likewise children of the streets, but for whom the path is steadily downwards. 'When I was first pitched neck and crop into the world, to play at leap-frog with its troubles,' is how Sam describes his early life to Mr Pickwick, and this image of leap-frogging over

<sup>13</sup> P.P., p. 529.

troubles concentrates all the essential qualities of Sam and his fellows - expressing their vitality and their stoical ability to belittle misfortune.<sup>14</sup> None of these characters wastes time or energy complaining about what cannot be altered. Sam sums up his attitude to trouble with typical eloquence, 'It's over, and can't be helped, and that's one consolation, as they always says in Turkey, ven they cuts the wrong man's head off'.<sup>15</sup> Like pride in sharpness, this tendency to minimize adversity in cheerful mockery is a familiar response to the hard experience of working-class life. Sam Weller's black humour has its counterpart in the often cruel jokes about capital punishment and physical deformities in popular Elizabethan humour and in the grotesquely callous songs sung in the trenches during the First World War. With a similar impulse to draw the sting from hardship which cannot be eliminated, by refusing to take it seriously, Sam describes his spell of sleeping rough under the arches of Waterloo Bridge as taking 'unfurnished lodgin's'.<sup>16</sup> In the same way, poor people had for centuries attempted to diminish the awe of the gallows with ironic nicknames like Jack Ketch. This kind of mocking stance in relation to physical suffering is clearly a defensive attitude which helps to keep up the spirit of those who are vulnerable to hardship. If trouble cannot be avoided one can at least laugh in its face and so salvage some sense

<sup>14</sup> P.P., p. 209.

<sup>15</sup> P.P., p. 315.

<sup>16</sup> P.P., p. 209.



of dignity and independence.

Authority in any form is seen by all these characters as trouble and thus as something to be automatically resisted, and, wherever possible, deflated of importance and terror by satiric mockery. None of them shows the least respect for the majesty of the law. 'This ain't the shop for justice', declares the Dodger at his trial and Sam Weller agrees, 'There ain't a magistrate goin' as don't commit himself, twice as often as he commits other people'.<sup>17</sup> These are expressions of a latent class attitude - the view of people who feel themselves on the outside of a legal system made for the protection of wealth and property. Their casual acceptance of injustice is vastly different from Pickwick's sense of moral outrage when his own trial reveals to him the true nature of the law. However, these urchin types are in no way revolutionary, and show not the slightest desire to overthrow the system. Rather they are born rebels, casually anarchic, like Dickens himself, in that they no sooner behold someone behaving with pompous officialdom or petty tyranny, be it beadle, or magistrate, or just the local blacksmith's boy who thinks he's made good, than they have an irresistible urge to reduce them to size. Trabb's boy's hilarious ridicule of Pip's gentlemanly affectations must be one of the most glorious deflations of pride in literature; no wonder Pip felt that nothing could make amends but the boy's best blood. Obviously such an anarchic tendency is

<sup>17</sup> O.T., p. 335; P.P., p. 340.

partly nurtured by that deflationary view of the world already discussed, but paradoxically the same cynicism acts as a means of limiting anarchy. When nothing is taken very seriously or regarded as worthy of respect, the kind of obsessive or committed belief necessary to motivate real anarchism or revolution can find no foothold. All these urchin characters in the novels are totally without that quality of brooding grudge and hatred which Dickens portrays in individuals like Uriah Heep and Bradley Headstone, for instance.

A mocking, deflationary urge also characterizes the urchins' response to the expression of high-sounding abstract ideals like Honour, Trust or Benevolence. They know from experience that such rhetoric is employed more often than not to cover hollow pomposity or selfish ends. Like his creator, Sam wages constant satiric war on all such false, inflated use of language. However, total cynicism is acquired at the cost of human sympathy. At times the laughter of these urchins is cruel. Bailey relishes teasing young boys with invitations to ride in the cab of his master's fashionable carriage only to whip them down when they attempt to jump in. The Dodger has 'a vicious propensity, too, of pulling the caps from the heads of small boys and tossing them down the areas'.<sup>18</sup> At the beginning of their association, one senses that Sam Weller has a similar readiness to mock his naive employer's gullibility and laugh at his respect for

<sup>18</sup> O.T., p. 65.

principle. In the course of the novel this unduly cynical bias is corrected and Sam learns that trust, generosity and affection, expressed in behaviour rather than rhetoric, deserve admiration not satire.

The basis for this modification of Sam's cynicism is already there when he meets Mr Pickwick. Although deeply suspicious of exaggerated expressions of principle, these urchins are neither immoral nor amoral. As in many other ways, they share the values of the class to which they belong. All these characters would hesitate to do down someone already at a disadvantage. As a young pickpocket tells Mayhew: 'I would rather rob the rich than the poor; they miss it less'.<sup>19</sup> Even the Dodger shows sympathy for Oliver when he notices how hungry he is, and, although he may be planning to take advantage of the child's helplessness, there is genuine fellowship in his words:

'But come', said the young gentleman: 'you want grub, and you shall have it. I'm at low-water-mark myself - only one bob and a magpie; but as far as it goes, I'll<sup>20</sup> fork out and stump.'

To recognize that moral feeling is operating here one has only to consider Noah Claypole's likely attitude to Oliver in similar circumstances. A quick sense of sympathy and solidarity with the unfortunate regulates Tony Weller's conduct towards his wife and his passengers, both of whom, in normal circumstances, he tends to regard as natural enemies:

<sup>19</sup> Mayhew, I, 411.

<sup>20</sup> O.T., p. 53.



'It's a rum sort o' thing, Sammy, to go a hankerin' arter anybody's property, ven you're assistin' 'em in illness. It's like helping an outside passenger up, ven he's been pitched off a coach, and puttin' your hand in his pocket, vile you ask him vith a sigh how he finds his-self, Sammy'.

21

His son is guided by the same pragmatic moral code in his changing attitude towards his employer.

All the qualities discussed here as typical of urchin types both inside and outside the novels, are immensely attractive to Dickens, and, we feel instinctively, many of them bear a close resemblance to qualities in his own character; not surprisingly since he too gained an early education on the streets. But the one common characteristic of all the street urchins which most excites his imagination, moving it always towards a comic liberation, is their ability to possess life with a restless, daring creativity. The urchins he depicts respond with a freedom from inhibition and an engaged energy to whatever their situation offers. They possess an openness to new experience and a versatile delight in the challenge of the unexpected which forms a sharply optimistic contrast to the timid social conformity of most of the middle-class characters with whom they interact, and whose personalities are fatally dulled by fear of social disapproval. This openness to the new gives to the urchins the potential to initiate change and challenge empty forms which is lacking in most of Dickens's middle-class characters after Mr Pickwick. Urchin types blow like a lively breeze through the stultified conventions of polite society, for

21 P.P., p. 769.

which Dickens himself had very little patience.<sup>22</sup>

The experience to which these characters respond most fully is to the enjoyment of their own colourful personalities; or what V.S. Pritchett calls 'the projection of [their] own imaginative conception of themselves'.<sup>23</sup> It is important to distinguish between the relish these urchins feel in thus dramatizing their sense of individuality, and the pompous self-inflation of a character like Podsnap. Whereas Podsnap's behaviour is aimed solely at imposing a sense of his importance upon his fellows, the extravagantly theatrical manner of a Sam Weller or Young Bailey is aimed primarily at pleasing themselves, and any audience to the performance is tacitly invited to share the enjoyment, rather than feel belittled by the comparison. This self-delight gives to these characters a sense of worth in their own eyes which no person or authority can disturb, and, in addition, this healthy self-esteem leads to a good-humoured view of the different individuality of others. One of Dickens's firmest-held beliefs throughout his life was that respect for other people begins with respect for self. He sees that middle-class conformity to the uniform standards of gentility makes them

<sup>22</sup> In a letter to Douglas Jerrold, Dickens explodes with irritation and contempt after attending a public dinner; he describes his fellow-guests as 'sleek, slobbering, bow-paunched, over-fed, apoplectic, snorting cattle'. Quoted in Speeches, p. xxii.

<sup>23</sup> 'The Comic World of Dickens', in The Dickens Critics, edited by George H. Ford and Lauriat Lane, Jr. (Ithaca, New York, 1961), p. 318. Robert Garis also notes this aspect of Dickens's characterisation, but he appears to regard it as incompatible with the highest art. The Dickens Theatre, pp. 63, 87.



into pretences of what they are not - instead of enjoying the resources of their own individuality they impersonate a socially approved pattern of sameness which robs them of self-pride and leaves them vulnerable to all manner of social fears. Such self-doubt can only be assuaged by attempting continually to assert their superiority over others. Genuine self-delight in one's own individuality invites others to participate in that delight; self-assertion demands that others acknowledge their own inferiority.

These urchin characters express their personalities by their colourful clothes, their rich, racy slang and by their extroverted behaviour. Mayhew writes of one coster lad he interviewed: 'He was dressed in all the slang beauty of his class, with bright red handkerchief and unexceptional boots'.<sup>24</sup> The Dodger's clothes do not reach these wild standards, although his hat is worn at the required defiantly rakish angle at the back of the head. However, at his trial the Dodger comes into his full glory, rising to the supreme theatrical occasion of his young life. While his magnificent comic performance of self cannot save him, it inflicts a wounding temporary deflation upon a biased system of justice, and lifts him serenely beyond any possibility of losing face and self-respect.

The most stunning depiction Dickens gives in his novels of self-dramatization by one of his urchins must be Young Bailey's insistence that he be shaved by his friend the

24 Mayhew, I, 39.



barber, Poll Sweedlepipe. It is also one of the most brilliantly funny of all Dickens's comic episodes. Although Bailey's cheek was 'as smooth as a new-laid egg or a scraped Dutch cheese', he imposes his fantasy of being a bewhiskered man-about-town upon the bemused Poll until physical evidence of 'sight and touch are as nothing'.<sup>25</sup> When the barber hesitates as before the receding ghost of a beard Bailey encourages him to 'Go in and win', and completes the bewitchment by murmuring regretfully, as he inspects the scraped-off lather in which there is not a single bristle, 'reether redder than I could wish, Poll'.<sup>26</sup>

This audacity of wit which can transform actuality, the feeling of sheer exhilaration in the performance, and the freedom to follow the intuitive logic of his own imaginative sense of himself, exhibited by Bailey in this scene, bear an obviously close resemblance to the special qualities which characterize Dickens's art as discussed in the previous chapter. There can be no doubt that Dickens shares with the urchin types he creates in his fiction many of his own unique gifts. Both have that power to break free from restricted forms, either of tradition or of expected social conventions, to create, by a flight of fancy, that which is excitingly, liberatingly new. Yet, like the pride in sharpness, even this theatrical quality has its foundation in actual working-class culture. Those who can take no pride

<sup>25</sup> M.C., p. 460.

<sup>26</sup> M.C., p. 461.

in wealth or social status can acquire prestige by developing a reputation as a 'character'. Such strongly individualistic qualities were indeed the boast of the London working people well before the time of Dickens. In 1713 an observer wrote:

Every mechanic has a peculiar cast of head and turn of wit, or some uncommon whim, as a characteristic that distinguishes him from the others of his trade. The ringleaders of the mob have an inexhaustible fund of archery and raillery; as likewise have our sailors and watermen. Our very street beggars are not without their peculiar oddities. 27

The relaxed affection which Dickens depicts so finely between the two Wellers is also to be comprehended in their shared cultural attitudes. Tony is very proud of his son's reputation for sharpness and Sam appreciates to the full his father's ability to 'perform' his rich personality, recounting lengthy examples of this in Tony's matrimonial and coaching exploits. The mutuality of feeling between the two is conveyed most eloquently not by what they say, but by the little that they need to say in order to understand each other:

Saying this, Mr Weller mixed two glasses of spirits and water, and produced a couple of pipes. The father and son sitting down opposite each other: Sam on one side of the fire, in the high-backed chair, and Mr Weller senior on the other, in an easy ditto: they proceeded to enjoy themselves with all due gravity.

'Anybody been here, Sammy?' asked Mr Weller senior, drily, after a long silence. Sam nodded an expressive assent.

27 Keith Thomas, 'The Place of Laughter in Tudor and Stuart England', T.L.S., 21st January 1977, p. 80.



'Red-nosed chap?' enquired Mr Weller.

Sam nodded again.

'Amiable man that 'ere, Sammy,' said Mr Weller, smoking violently.

'Seems so,' observed Sam.

28

What important differences there are between Sam and Tony are as much a reflection of social conditions as the qualities which unite them. Partly because of his education on the streets, but more because of the generation gap between them, Sam belongs to a different world from that of his father. This difference is registered in a changing standard of decorum. Sam, as we notice, is more likely to use wit and subtlety to gain his ends whereas his father turns automatically to physical solutions or trickery. Although Sam is ready to use physical force and clearly enjoys his encounters with the beadles, his revenge on the conceited servants at Bath and his triumph over Serjeant Buzfuz seem more typical. In 1714, Lord Chesterfield wrote:

Frequent and loud laughter is the characteristic of folly and ill manners; it is the manner in which the mob express their silly joy at silly things ... there is nothing so illiberal, and so ill-bred, as audible laughter ... not to mention the disagreeable noise that it makes, and the shocking distortions of the face that it occasions.

29

We can recognize Tony Weller in this description even though we do not share the contempt, but we do not associate his son with it at all. Sam has his father's admirable zest for life but he expresses it more quietly. The second Mrs Weller who has social as well as spiritual pretensions (the

28 P.P., p. 369.

29 Chesterfield's Letters, p. 49.



two often go together in Dickens's observation) finds her husband's loud body-shaking laughter a source of great irritation:

'It's only a kind o' quiet laugh as I'm tryin' to come, Sammy ... if I could ha' done it ... it 'ud ha' saved a good many vords atween your mother-in-law and me'. 30

Despite his enjoyment of the ridiculous, his ready wit, and frequent role of entertainer in tap-rooms and kitchens, Sam Weller rarely, if ever, indulges in loud laughter.

The major area of difference between Sam and his father is that of work. Tony gains his sense of identity from the long tradition of a particular craft. Such tradition provides accepted patterns of behaviour, standards of judgement, even forms of dress, which are shared by all its members. This sense of a communal way of life and close fellowship underlies Tony Weller's character in the way that Sam's early experiences underlie his. Mr Weller identifies completely with his profession which he regards with an almost mystical pride:

'How it ever come to that 'ere pass,' resumed the parent Weller, 'I can't say. Wy is it that long-stage coachmen possess such insiniuations, and is always looked up to - a-dored I may say - by ev'ry young 'ooman in every town he vurks through, I don't know. I only know that so it is. It's a reg'lation of natur' - a dispensary, as your poor mother-in-law used to say'. 31

Tony does not think of himself as any less a coachman off the cab than on; the notion pervades every aspect of his

30 P.P., p. 632.

31 P.P., p. 736.

life. The inseparability of the man from the work is obvious in the way that coaching terms constantly colour his speech. In times of trouble or good fortune he looks naturally to the support of his colleagues. They help in the revenge upon Mr Stiggins, and Mr Weller is equally energetic when one of them falls into difficulty. As with Sam and Tony the close comradeship of the coachmen is superbly conveyed by Dickens in the laconic brevity of their speech. When all share the same feelings little needs to be said:

'Vell, George,' said Mr Weller, senior, taking off his upper coat, and seating himself with his accustomed gravity. 'How is it? All right behind, and full inside?'

'All right, old fellow,' replied the embarrassed gentleman.

'Is the grey mare made over to anybody?' inquired Mr Weller, anxiously.

George nodded in the affirmative.

'Vell, that's all right,' said Mr Weller. 'Coach taken care on, also?'

'Con-signed in a safe quarter,' replied George, wringing the heads off half-a-dozen shrimps, and swallowing them without any more ado. 32

Louis James writes of 'the natural expression of the working-class love of ritual' in which 'daily transactions and moments such as apprenticeship or a new job, all had their little ceremonials, usually accompanied by a drink'.<sup>33</sup> These rituals were important to working people as a means of expressing communal ties and as a way of increasing the dignity of otherwise humble lives. Such ceremonials

32 P.P., p. 603.

33 Print and the People 1819-1851 (London, 1976), p. 65.



encourage that cultivation of personal idiosyncrasy or performance of self already described since all the participants are expected to contribute individually to the impressiveness of the event. Self-display in such contexts becomes a means of enhancing, not just personal reputation, but group pride. Since he has turned to them with his problems, it is only natural that Tony Weller should invite his colleagues to celebrate his good fortune, and they contribute to its memorability with an impressively dramatic ritual:

'Hold hard there,' interposed the mottled-faced gentleman, with sudden energy, 'your eyes on me, gen'lm'n.'

Saying this, the mottled-faced gentleman rose, as did the other gentlemen. The mottled-faced gentleman reviewed the company, and slowly lifted his hand, upon which every man (including him of the mottled countenance) drew a long breath, and lifted his tumbler to his lips. In one instant the mottled-faced gentleman depressed his hand again, and every glass was set down empty. It is impossible to describe the thrilling effect produced by this striking ceremony. At once dignified, solemn, and impressive, it combined every element of grandeur. 34

Turning from such a striking scene of shared experience to Sam Weller, one realizes what an isolated figure he is, and how much less secure is his world than that of his father. Sam attends another celebration during the novel, the 'swarry' given by the servants at Bath. Superficially, the two occasions seem to have much in common. The servants also see their dinner as an opportunity for self-display and for increasing their pride and dignity. However there



is a subtle but important difference. Whereas festive events among the coachmen are a means of self-fulfilment, for the servants they are used for self-aggrandizement. The audience for whom the coachmen perform is their own fraternity and the standards and expectations are measured from within their own traditions. With the servants there is a constant sense that they are looking over their shoulders to see how much they are impressing the rest of the world. Sam scorns the genteel pretensions of the Bath servants but he is like them in having no traditional image of himself as a member of a craft or trade to provide a sense of identity and pride without reference to a competitive outside world. That kind of inclusive security was beginning to fade with the decline of traditional crafts even while Dickens was writing Pickwick Papers. In this sense Sam is a typically modern man in an individualistic class society. He is much more thrown back upon his own resources for any sense of identity and self-esteem he can achieve, than is his father.

Mr Weller remains a coachman whatever he happens to be doing, but Sam by no means remains a servant in all situations. He is proud of his versatility and changes jobs like his modern counterparts in order to improve his prospects. 'I worn't always a boots, sir', he tells Mr Pickwick. 'I shall be a gen'lm'n myself one of these days, perhaps, with a pipe in my mouth, and a summer-house in the back garden'.<sup>35</sup> Sam

<sup>35</sup> P.P., p. 209.

it would seem, is quite prepared to change his way of life to suit changing conditions. Similarly, with his greater sense of decorum, he is more able than his father to adapt his behaviour to suit the company, flattering his mother-in-law, beguiling the court with his air of innocence, and entering into Bob Sawyer's high-spirited fun with relish. Sam turns the loss of a secure communal tradition into an asset. Compared to his son's gregarious, inventive adaptability, Tony Weller's life style seems rather narrow and restricted. Tony's freemasonry is confined to his coaching brethren, but his son's is universal.

However, as always with social change, gain is accompanied with some loss. Sam is a success in the more individualistic world he inhabits and his prospects are obviously wider in scope than his father's, but the potential dangers of such self-reliance are also greater. Sam spends a fortnight sleeping rough as a result of leaving his job with the carrier and there is no fraternal help for him as there is for Mr Weller's friend, George. When Jingle and Job Trotter land themselves in the debtor's prison their salvation rests upon the lucky chance of Mr Pickwick noticing them, not upon help from others sharing their interests. Like Sam, but more disreputably, Jingle and Job are seeking to make their way in the world unaided apart from their own wits. In this, all three resemble the increasing number of men at that time who were forced to leave the security of traditional employment and seek their fortunes in a more competitive, individualistic society.

Sam's relation with Mr Pickwick is seen sometimes as one of almost feudal loyalty. George Orwell claims that Dickens's sympathetically drawn servants are 'at once doggishly faithful and completely familiar'.<sup>36</sup> Such a description seems strangely at odds with the picture of Sam Weller as a typical product of the city streets and of a modern class society that I have been attempting to draw. Does Dickens in this aspect of the novel betray the realistic authenticity of Sam's character for the sake of conforming to a reassuringly traditional view of the master-servant relation? It is worth looking more closely at the relationship depicted between masters and servants by earlier authors to see how far Sam Weller is conceived within this conservative image, and how far Dickens moved away from past literary conventions.

Sam Weller's predecessors are easy to find. In the 1848 preface to Nicholas Nickleby Dickens writes of 'sitting in by-places near Rochester Castle with a head full of PARTRIDGE, STRAP, TOM PIPES, and SANCHO PANZA'.<sup>37</sup> Even as a child it seems the servants had priority over their masters in his imagination. This is certainly not the case

<sup>36</sup> Orwell, p. 62.

<sup>37</sup> Garrett Stewart is perceptive in comparing the relationship between Sam and Pickwick to that between Lear and his Fool, as well as to that between Quixote and Sancho Panza. He makes the point that these earlier retainers also 'serve very foolish fond old men, and serve them by teaching them the world'. Dickens and the Trials of Imagination (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1974), p. 74.



in the novels themselves. All these characters enter upon their duties as servants while they are upon an equal economic footing with their prospective masters. Partridge and Strap are actually better off than Tom Jones and Roderick Random. Moreover, in each case it is the servants who insist upon serving, subjecting themselves voluntarily to inferior status. Strap's emotional response to Roderick Random's self-induced penury accurately captures the tone of all these servant-master relationships:

'There's all I have in the world; take it, and I'll perhaps get more for you before that be done. If not, I'll beg for you, steal for you, go through the wide world with you, and starve with you ...' Upon examining the purse, I found in it two half guineas and a half crown, which I would have returned to him ... but he absolutely refused my proposal and told me, it was more reasonable and decent that he should depend upon me who was a gentleman, than that I should be controlled by him. 38

None of the authors feels the need to offer any social or psychological explanation of such attitudes, for them it is simply the way their world is ordered.

Nothing could be more different from the agreement between Sam Weller and Mr Pickwick. Their initial interview establishes the foundation from which the relation between the two is to develop with psychological delicacy and convincing social detail. In this case it is Pickwick who searches out Sam, having been impressed by his quick wits at the White Hart on the occasion of Rachel Wardle's elopement. With typical Cockney cheek Sam uses this incident to undermine Pickwick's authority at the outset.

38 Roderick Random, pp. 78-9.

'He was one too many for you, warn't he? Up to snuff and a pinch or two over - eh?' he gloats admiringly on Jingle's discomfiture of Wardle and Pickwick.<sup>39</sup> That final 'eh?' is almost a familiar nudge in the ribs. For this reason perhaps Pickwick's next remark has all the impressive gravity of the Boardroom, 'Now with regard to the matter on which I, with the concurrence of these gentlemen, sent for you'.<sup>40</sup> Sam's enthusiastic reception of this pompous little speech is superbly deflationary - 'That's the pint, sir,' interposed Sam, 'out vith it, as the father said to the child, ven he swallowed a farden'.<sup>41</sup> Valiantly Pickwick makes one final effort to regain control of the situation, 'We want to know in the first place,' said Mr Pickwick, 'whether you have any reason to be discontented with your present situation?'.<sup>42</sup> But Sam is not to be repressed or impressed - 'I should like to know, in the first place,' he mimics, 'whether you're a-goin' to purvide me with a better?'.<sup>43</sup> Obviously it is Mr Pickwick who must do the asking on this occasion. From this point the interview is brisk for it is conducted by Sam and his purpose is the non-feudal one of ensuring that it will be worth his while financially to take the offered job. The whole arrangement, seen by Sam as primarily a matter of pay and conditions, is surprisingly

<sup>39</sup> P.P., p. 154.

<sup>40</sup> P.P., p. 154.

<sup>41</sup> P.P., p. 154.

<sup>42</sup> P.P., p. 154.

<sup>43</sup> P.P., p. 154.

modern, despite the inclusion of clothing as part of the agreed wage.

As a result of accepting Mr Pickwick's offer, Sam becomes financially dependent upon him, a situation which he accepts without reservations as a fact of life. Unlike the earlier servants, he does not complain about the tasks he is expected to fulfil, but despite this he is much more independent than them in his attitude towards his master. Such a sense of freedom is the positive aspect of regarding the relationship between employer and employee as an economic bargain which critics of the cash-nexus like Carlyle failed to appreciate. Far from feeling himself to be inferior, there is every indication that Sam initially sees himself as superior to his rather old-fashioned employer by virtue of his sharpness and quicker wits. Even after he has been some weeks in Mr Pickwick's employment he is unperturbed at the thought of Job exploiting his master's sympathies for money, and obviously has half a mind to try the same trick himself. 'I say,' said [Sam], 'not a bad notion that 'ere crying. I'd cry like a rain-water spout in a shower on such good terms. How do you do it?'<sup>44</sup>

Mr Pickwick's attitude towards Sam is far less cynical, but it is not faultless. Mr Pickwick prides himself on being a collector, and his crowning triumph, as he sees it, is the capture of a real live 'character' in the shape of Sam Weller. His proprietary attitude towards Sam becomes

<sup>44</sup> P.P., p. 218.



quite explicit in his reply to an enquiry about his servant from Mr Peter Magnus:

'Not exactly a friend', replied Mr Pickwick in a low tone. 'The fact is, he is my servant, but I allow him to take a good many liberties; for, between ourselves, I flatter myself he is an original, and I am rather proud of him.'

45

Mr Pickwick does not pause to consider why he should flatter himself with Sam's originality. He regards Sam almost as an object which he has had the genius to discover. Sam is not quite Mr Pickwick's court jester, but at first he is not regarded so very differently by his employer.

Thus, both master and servant embark on their relationship motivated by egoistic considerations which prevent either of them from seeing the other as he really is - as an individual in his own right. In the process of mutual discovery which Dickens traces in the novel he shows both Sam's modern form of cynicism and Pickwick's traditional proprietary paternalism giving way to a firmer evaluation based upon a real sense of the other as a person.

This process is initiated when they are both fooled by Jingle and Job Trotter at Bury St. Edmunds. The incident forces Sam to realize that he is not quite so smart as he had liked to think, and that partly as a result of his gullibility Mr Pickwick has been victimized. As Sam helps him into bed after he has spent the night in the young ladies' seminary Mr Pickwick says, 'I don't think he'll escape us quite so easily the next time, Sam?'.<sup>46</sup> The 'us'

<sup>45</sup> P.P., p. 299.

<sup>46</sup> P.P., p. 226.

is significant - Mr Pickwick and Sam have recognized a common interest. From this point on Mr Pickwick comes to rely more and more upon the shrewdness, energy and quick wits which Sam alone of his companions can offer. Whenever he is troubled, it is to Sam he instinctively turns for help, and he is never disappointed. From Bury St. Edmunds they return to London to visit Dodson and Fogg and on this occasion Sam is far from gullible, rescuing his employer physically before he can land himself still deeper into trouble. The dialogue which follows this incident clearly demonstrates the increasing force of Sam's personality on Mr Pickwick. Such a conversation could not have taken place before they left Eatanswill together:

'Sam, I will go immediately to Mr Perker's.'  
 'That's just exactly the wery place vere you ought to have gone last night, sir,' replied Mr Weller.  
 'I think it is, Sam,' said Mr Pickwick.  
 'I know it is,' said Mr Weller.  
 'Well, well, Sam,' replied Mr Pickwick, 'we will go there at once, but first, as I have been rather ruffled, I should like a glass of brandy and warm water, Sam. Where can I have it, Sam?' 47

The repetition of Sam's name in this last comment by Pickwick conveys an almost childlike sense of trust. At Pickwick's trial for breach of promise, only Sam among Mr Pickwick's friends remains cool enough to withstand the verbal bullying of Serjeant Buzfuz and he actually turns the tables on him by producing evidence against Dodson and Fogg. Finally in Bath, when the unfortunate Mr Winkle takes flight from the ferocity of Mr Dowler, Mr Pickwick again turns with complete

faith to Sam to solve the problem. By this time he is fully aware of Sam's qualities of reliability and resourcefulness: 'Sam,' said Mr Pickwick, grasping his hand, 'you're a capital fellow; an invaluable fellow. You must follow him, Sam.'<sup>48</sup> Mr Pickwick's gesture here is that of brotherhood. The jester has become the right arm.

Sam's attitude to Mr Pickwick has undergone a similar change. His increased regard for his employer comes partly from his appreciation of the true worth of Pickwick's kindness, but more from admiration for his continually responsive and 'game' attitude to life. This fatal combination of impulsive kindness and reckless defiance of sober self-interest, the opposite of Sam's much-vaunted worldly cynicism, constantly leads the good Pickwick into trouble. Thus Sam comes to see Mr Pickwick not simply as a typical employer, but as a vulnerable innocent in need of protection. Even more important, Mr Pickwick completes Sam's education by showing him that life is richer for the kind of qualities he brings to it. The escapade to see Arabella Allan at night is typical of Pickwick's reckless disregard for prudence, and Sam watching him sums up his feelings for his employer in a tone of protective indulgence and affectionate admiration:

'Bless his old gaiters,' rejoined Sam, looking out at the garden-door. 'He's a keepin' guard in the lane with that 'ere dark lantern, like a amiable Guy Fawkes! I never see such a fine creetur in my days. Blessed if I don't think his heart must ha' been born five-and-twenty years arter his body, at least!'

<sup>48</sup> P.P., p. 529.

<sup>49</sup> P.P., p. 556.



The cynical Sam at the White Hart has travelled a long way to arrive at this sentiment.

However, this dependency of Mr Pickwick on Sam, and Sam's sense of responsibility for his employer must not be overstressed. Equally important is their growing enjoyment of each other's company. If Sam begins by telling his stories to shock Mr Pickwick, he ends by telling them to please him. As Pickwick comes to understand Sam more fully he learns to enjoy his astringently ironic view of the world. There is a similar contrast here to that made between the 'swarry' at Bath and Mr Weller's celebration with the coachmen. Initially, both Mr Pickwick and Sam have a tendency to look over their shoulders to an imaginary audience for approbation. Sam tells his stories mainly to show off his worldliness and Mr Pickwick listens to them as examples of Sam's 'character' which his keenness as a student of life has enabled him to recognize. Gradually, however, such outside opinion ceases to matter and the stories are told and listened to for the self-contained pleasure of the two participants. Beneath all the humour and fun of Pickwick Papers there is a gentle sense of pathos in the slow growth of reciprocal affection between these two essentially lonely figures - a kind and wealthy, but not very wise old man and his young, sharp, working-class servant.

Far from being the unthinking loyalty typical of a feudal retainer, Sam's decision to follow Mr Pickwick into the Fleet represents the culmination of this long developing

friendship between the two. It is the crisis which forces Pickwick to see Sam as a person quite distinct from himself:

'Old men may come here, through their own heedlessness and unsuspicion: and young men may be brought here by the selfishness of those they serve. It is better for those young men, in every point of view that they should not remain here. Do you understand me, Sam?' 50

Similarly, Mr Pickwick's imprisonment causes Sam to openly abandon his code of self-interest. Even while he relates his parable about the folly of acting according to principle he is himself proving it false. In this scene where Sam returns to the Fleet, the warm understanding which has grown between the two is marvellously dramatized by Dickens. As with the scenes between Sam and his father, it is what is implied rather than what is said which most impresses:

Here Mr Pickwick, rubbing his nose with an air of some vexation, Mr Weller thought it prudent to change the theme of the discourse.

'I takes my determination on principle, sir,' remarked Sam, 'and you takes yours on the same ground; wich puts me in mind o' the man as killed his-self on principle, wich o' course you've heerd on, sir.' Mr Weller paused when he arrived at this point, and cast a comical look at his master out of the corner of his eyes.

'There is no "of course" in the case, Sam,' said Mr Pickwick, gradually breaking into a smile, in spite of the uneasiness which Sam's obstinacy had given him.

'The fame of the gentleman in question, never reached my ears.'

'No, sir!' exclaimed Mr Weller. 'You astonish me, sir.' 51

Even here, in this first novel, Dickens's ability to convey a complex emotional and social situation with precise delicacy and economy of means is superb.

50 P.P., p. 599.

51 P.P., pp. 615-16.



Pickwick Papers is Dickens's most optimistic novel, and it is Sam Weller, the city urchin, who gives strength to this optimism. Like the young Charles Dickens, Sam is a modern man with all the qualities needed to take advantage of the changing, fermenting society of early nineteenth-century England. The old, traditional ways of life which encouraged men like Tony Weller and Mr Pickwick to see people in stereotyped, long-accustomed roles were disappearing, and a new class society, with its promise of social mobility offered exhilarating possibilities of achieving previously unthought-of heights of personal fulfilment to those who had the daring and the wit to seize creatively upon the challenges life offered. Instead of the potentially demeaning system of patronage portrayed between masters and servants in eighteenth-century novels, the institution of a hard cash bargain allowed both parties to feel independent and to appreciate each other as such. Dickens may not have continued to regard the cash nexus in quite so optimistic a light, but all his life he maintained a healthy distrust of patronage, believing it to be demeaning to those on the receiving end.<sup>52</sup>

Even at this early time, however, he was not so facilely optimistic as to be unaware of the dangers inherent in social

<sup>52</sup> Dickens's dislike of patronage is expressed frequently in his speeches, especially those to the Royal Literary Fund, a society through which he hoped to improve the professional and independent status of writers, so that they had no need of what he called, on one occasion, 'the shame of the purchased dedication'. See Speeches, pp. 157, 176, 212.



change. The loss of traditional patterns of life brought vast new insecurity and isolation to individuals bereft of the comfort and support of a known community. In Sam Weller that haunting note of individual loneliness which recurs throughout nineteenth-century fiction, is sounded for the first time. The other danger which Dickens clearly foresaw was that the uncertainty caused by the breaking-up of old ways of life might seem so frightening that many people would rush from the safe restrictions of a hierarchical society to the apparent security of a rigid emphasis on social conformity. This is precisely the case of the servants at Bath. They assert a new-found equality with those they work for, taking offence when Sam uses the word 'Missises' ('We don't recognize such distinctions here') but what they fail to realize is that their very aping of the genteel manners and behaviour of their employers is a tacit admission that they do not feel equal.<sup>53</sup> By such attitudes the possibility of social freedom for all, regardless of wealth or birth, brought about by the disintegration of the old, ordered pattern of society was immediately threatened with the even more rigid stratification of social class.

The qualities he depicts in his urchin types are seen by Dickens as offering a safeguard against both these types of dangers. The challenging insecurity, with its potential for individual opportunity, found in a class society, is

<sup>53</sup> P.P., p. 525.

but an enlarged version of the urban environment which first nurtured their characteristic sharpness. This quality is uniquely formed by, and suited to, a society which regulates itself according to the ethic of the survival of the fittest. The competitive capitalist society is but the London street writ large. However, too much sharpness tends to drive out humanity. In the course of Pickwick Papers Sam Weller moves from a state of almost total cynicism, towards a personally committed sense of fellowship with his employer, and in so doing creates, or radically modifies, his sense of practical ethics. Fittingly, he constructs from the total of his experience a very modern sensibility which emphasizes individual choice and autonomy. Sam remains suspicious of high-sounding abstract ideals, he is knowledgeable but tolerant of the deviousness of human nature, and he has discovered that ultimately he is prepared to cling stubbornly to his own enlarged conception of right and wrong which gives due emphasis to the affections of the human heart.

Though Sam is denied the traditional pride in a long-established craft or trade such as that which sustains his father, the street urchin in him is never tempted by the substitute of gentility. For him, self-respect depends upon the fulfilment of one's true self, not by trying to impress others in the manner of the Bath servants. Such servile snobbery is utterly alien to all Dickens's urchin types partly because of their justified pride in their sharpness, but much more by virtue of their other great quality - their

spontaneous delight in endlessly inventing and elaborating the myth of their own uniqueness. For Sam Weller, as for all these types, a self-sustaining sense of personal worth comes from the joy of just being himself. In subsequent novels Dickens becomes more and more concerned with the debilitating effects of gentility upon working-class people and the feelings of personal inadequacy and class shame it imposes, and he explores these effects with increasing depth from Ham in David Copperfield to Pip and Magwitch, and finally Bradley Headstone. But in this, his first novel, optimism prevails, and in Sam Weller he creates a convincingly modern man, fully able to meet the complexities and challenges of a changing world; working class and yet unashamed of his social origins.

None of the subsequent urchin characters survive quite as triumphantly as Sam. The Dodger in Oliver Twist, for all his resilience and sharpness cannot escape the perils of the streets, and even Young Bailey's salvation, implicated as it is in the moral pantomime ending of Martin Chuzzlewit, seems somewhat contrived. The urchin has one last moment of glory in Trabb's boy, and this sudden reappearance with all the old exuberance and spirited self-delight offers a profound comment upon poor Pip's self-shaming, self-alienating flight to gentility. However, Trabb's boy, despite his genuine urchin character, is not part of the life of London streets. He remains in that childhood world of the marshes. It is Pip who seems to Dickens by that time more like modern man, turning his face,



as the mist rises, away from his early Eden, with the journey through the world all before him, and his lonely fate to work out. And what a different figure he is from young Sam Weller.

CHAPTER 4Martin Chuzzlewit - A Storm of Words

A frequent feature of Saturdays at Todgers is the recapture of Young Bailey from one of his 'excursive bolts into the neighbouring alleys ... there to play at leap-frog and other sports with vagrant lads'.<sup>1</sup> The image of leap-frog which connects the two great urchin characters in Dickens's novels, Sam Weller and Young Bailey, also serves to pinpoint the essential difference between the more active of the male and the female working-class characters in Dickens's novels. This image, with its sense of vitality and careless fun, perfectly expresses the buoyant nature of the city urchin, but among all Dickens's working-class women we find no leap-froggers. The sense of freedom and spontaneity is entirely missing.

While the pressures of Victorian urban life encouraged working-class boys to sharpen their wits and prosper by their native cunning, different pressures on girls pushed them into assuming a sense of responsibility and duty. The girls tended naturally to identify with their overburdened mothers, and, like Charley in Bleak House, they were expected to cope with household duties as soon as they were old enough to stagger about. One woman, brought up in the Fens in the 1850's, working a fourteen hour day in the

<sup>1</sup> M.C., p. 141.

bitter fields from the age of eight, writes typically that her mother's 'life was one long life of loving sacrifice ... Scores of times I have seen her sit down to a meal of dry bread, so that we might have a tiny mite of butter on our bread, and yet she never complained'.<sup>2</sup> Always before them was this suffering, sacrificing figure of their mother - little wonder such girls did not find life a matter for leap-frog. Another working-class woman remembers how 'my mother always seemed to have a child at her breast, and ... I would often keep her company ... until late at night, as she nursed the baby and waited for my father to come home'. When he did not arrive, she ran 'from pub to pub ... trying to get him to come home before he spent all his pay'.<sup>3</sup> Tess D'Urberville in Hardy's novel is betrayed by just this sense of precocious responsibility, and, typically, is thwarted in her efforts to help by her inability to gain any employment beyond the most drudging and meanly-paid. By contrast, Mrs Gamp's son exhibits the typical irresponsibility of the urchin, combined with the type's love of self-dramatization. Sent to sell Gamp's wooden leg for matches - 'ev'ry individgle penny that child lost at toss or buy for kidney ones; and come home arterwards quite bold, to break the news, and offering to drown himself if that would be a satisfaction to his parents'.<sup>4</sup> For any boy from a destitute or uncaring

<sup>2</sup> Life As We Have Known It, edited by Margaret Llewellyn Davies (London, 1977), pp. 112-113.

<sup>3</sup> Burnett, p. 215.

<sup>4</sup> M.C., p. 405.



home the streets offered freedom and at least the possibility of making a quick livelihood; for girls in the non-industrial areas there was only some kind of domestic service or prostitution. Mayhew met many young male street urchins who had run away from home and were sustaining themselves on the streets, but, he writes, 'I did not hear of any girls who had run away from their homes having become street sellers merely. They more generally fall into a course of prostitution'.<sup>5</sup>

Thus while their more fortunate brothers could enjoy at least a few years of relative freedom from responsibility and the crushing burdens of work, young working-class girls moved straight from infancy into servitude and care - like the Marchioness in The Old Curiosity Shop, of whom Dick Swiveller thinks, 'she must have been at work from her cradle'.<sup>6</sup>

In view of such typical early experience it is hardly surprising that working-class women, generally, are far less buoyant, far less able to sustain a sense of their own individuality, than their male counterparts. Among these women in Dickens's novels it is impossible to find a self-delighting performance of personality comparable to the Dodger's at his trial, or to Trabb's boy as he saunters aristocratically past Pip wearing the carpet bag. Sairey Gamp is one of the most assertive of all Dickens's working-class women, but if one compares her with such superbly,

<sup>5</sup> Mayhew, I, 469.

<sup>6</sup> O.C.S., p. 255.

aggressively confident women as Ursula the pig-woman in Bartholomew Fair, or Doll in The Alchemist, or Chaucer's Wife of Bath, it becomes obvious that Sairey's projection of herself is defensive and insecure. Only these former women take the same kind of pleasure in dramatizing imaginative conceptions of their own personalities as is taken by the city urchins in Dickens's novels, and they also challenge life with the same active energy. Doll and Ursula have, in fact, been reared in a very similar environment to the city urchins of Dickens's day. His women, however, have lost this kind of freedom, and with it the sense of their own characters to be exuberantly dramatized and continually recreated. Self-suppression in duty and domestic drudgery do not liberate individuality, they crush it. This sense of losing one's personality is poignantly described by a young girl as she embarks on a life of domestic service:

At home I was 'our Poll' to my beloved little sister and brother; 'my little wench' to father; 'a reg'lar little 'oman' sometimes but often 'a slommucky little hussy' to my sorely tried mother ... Now I was to be parted from my family, my friends, my home, the school, the village - all that I loved most dearly. To them too I was a person; but I knew from hearsay that once I had donned the maid's cap and apron I would become a menial, a nobody, mindful of my place, on the  
bottom shelf. 7

Lacking that self-sustaining sense of individuality which helps the urchins to survive, women look to support from other women and develop a strong sense of mutual sympathy. The working-class tradition of co-operation in

<sup>7</sup> Burnett, p. 227.

struggles and hardship may well have its foundation in the sisterly regard for their own kind practised by working-class women. Dickens notices this in Bleak House.

Describing the mutual care of the two brickmakers' wives for each other's troubles, he comments through Esther:

I thought it very touching to see these two women, coarse and shabby and beaten, so united; to see what they could be to one another; to see how they felt for one another; how the heart of each to each was softened by the hard trials of their lives. <sup>8</sup>

Closely tied as they are to the hard trials of birth, sickness, hunger and death, women strive to create by their friendships a small oasis of sympathy, more trusting and gentler than the outside world. Such close friendship not only encourages the women to endure hardship, it also gives them a sense of personal worth in a world where they tend to be under-rated or ignored. A poor woman from the slum district of Salford writes with a typical sense of pride that her mother 'was a marvel ... She couldn't read or write, but she was a good woman ... and the people in trouble, it didn't matter how bad they were, she'd go and try to help 'em'.<sup>9</sup>

Nineteenth-century, working-class women needed the help of each other in this way since they could expect little support from their menfolk. Mr Gamp seems little worse than many actual husbands in drinking the shoes off his baby's

<sup>8</sup> B.H., p. 109.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Thompson, 'Voices from Within', in The Victorian City edited by H.J. Dyos and Michael Wolff, 2 vols (London), 1976, I, 74.



feet and in knocking out his wife's front teeth.<sup>10</sup> Among the street urchins Mayhew noticed that, 'the boy's opinion of the girl seems to be that she is made to help him, or to supply gratification to his passions'.<sup>11</sup> He also remarked that on even the suspicion of offence 'the "gals" are sure to be beaten cruelly and savagely by their "chaps" '.<sup>12</sup> Such indeed is the life history of Nancy in Oliver Twist, exploited and bullied first by Fagin and then by Sikes.

Frequently, for such working-class women in Victorian society there are only two options open in life. Either they fight, or they submit and become passive victims in a male-dominated society. The entrepreneurial freedom to make their own way in the world and control their lives like Sam Weller does not exist for them. Young Martin Chuzzlewit speaks for most women, not just Mary, when he says, 'She has to endure, Mark: to endure without the possibility of action, poor girl!'<sup>13</sup>

Some of the most memorable of Dickens's working-class characters are those angry, shrewish women who choose to fight back rather than submit to the passive ideal of Victorian womanhood. Like the urchins they are characterized

<sup>10</sup> Paul Thompson quotes an example of the typical attitude of Victorian men to household chores: 'A lad hadn't to do anything ... They're not going to make a girl out of my lad', The Victorian City, I, 74. Thomas Wright gives a graphic account of wife-beating in The Great Unwashed (London, 1868), pp. 131-2.

<sup>11</sup> Mayhew, I, 475.

<sup>12</sup> Mayhew, I, 477.

<sup>13</sup> M.C., p. 528.

by activity and energy, but in them this is expressed most forcibly in their vigorous language. Although angry working-class women are found throughout Dickens's novels, they too are most numerous in the early ones and again their most exalted representative, Sairey Gamp, belongs, like Sam Weller and Young Bailey, to the early period of his work.

The battle waged by these shrewish women is continuous, and they remain needle-sharp, with their anger always at flash point, ready to flare out in a scorching shower of words. This anger is used not only to protect themselves from bullying and oppression, but as a means of rallying their self-respect. The indignation Dickens shows simmering in these women is a continual protest at their usage and inferior status in an unjust world. While they can sustain their anger they can sustain a sense that they do matter, that they do have a claim to regard and dignity as human beings. However, the sharpness of Dickens's angry women is more desperate than that quality of 'sharpness' on which Sam Weller and the Dodger are seen to pride themselves, and is more narrowly defensive, constricting individuality rather than leading to any source of personal pleasure. 'Poverty had made my mother sharp as well as careful', writes a former housemaid and it does the same to the Marchioness in The Old Curiosity Shop, whose 'natural cunning had been sharpened by necessity and privation'.<sup>14</sup> The servant Miggs in Barnaby Rudge has a 'sharp and acid visage', Susan Nipper in Dombey

<sup>14</sup> Burnett, p. 215; O.C.S., p. 434.

and Son is so 'desperately sharp and biting that she [seems] to make one's eyes water', while Jenny Wren looks at visitors 'out of the corners of her grey eyes with a look that out-sharpened all her other sharpness'.<sup>15</sup>

Such women are quick to take offence at any slight to their dignity. When Jonas Chuzzlewit vents his bad temper upon Mrs Gamp her reaction is a dazzling illustration of attack being the best means of defence, and, in particular, of the way angry women use speech as a weapon in their war against men. Jonas is drowned in words; his irritability quenched in a seemingly endless stream of assertion, explanation, interrogation and fantasy which only pauses when Sairey runs out of breath and even then 'she had that peculiar trembling of the head which, in ladies of her excitable nature, may be taken as a sure indication of their breaking out again very shortly'.<sup>16</sup> Women learn to use words thus to check and smother the more direct physical aggression of men who are nearly always less articulate. Mrs Gamp's speech is a forceful mixture of angry dignity ('I hope, sir ... as no bones is broke by me and Mrs Harris a-walkin' down upon a public wharf'), a politic plea for sympathy ('I has my feelins as a woman, sir, and I have been a mother likewise') and a steely underlying threat ('Don't try no impogician with the Nuss, for she will not abear it!').<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> B.R., p. 55; D.S., p. 25; O.M.F., p. 222.

<sup>16</sup> M.C., p. 631.

<sup>17</sup> M.C., p. 631.



Sairey knows that she is fighting with her back to the wall and any betrayal of weakness will undo her. It is particularly men who arouse this kind of automatic hostility in Dickens's working-class women. In almost every novel some inept man is pounced upon by one or more angry females and berated in good, round terms for his insensitivity, brutality and lack of appreciation towards the 'weaker' sex. Mr Pecksniff suffers just such an encounter when he arouses the indignation of Mrs Gamp's female neighbours by summoning her for a death rather than a birth.

It is not surprising, perhaps, that Dickens should be uneasy about this female hostility towards his sex which he obviously perceives. From The Sketches onwards he implicitly recognizes both the cause and the necessity of women's anger, and gives it vivid life in their passionate speech. Yet, again and again in explicit comment he seems to deny its validity. Perhaps it is more surprising that he perceives the issue at all, since he is the only nineteenth-century writer to do so. Robert Garis pays tribute to 'the remarkable sincerity and spontaneity with which Dickens approached this unfamiliar territory of human experience'.<sup>18</sup> Gissing had noticed and praised this very modern interest of Dickens much earlier, especially commending the portrait of Fanny Dorrit.<sup>19</sup>

One of the scenes described in Sketches by Boz takes place in a pawn-shop and involves a pair of women who give dramatic

<sup>18</sup> Garis, p. 240.

<sup>19</sup> Gissing, p. 156.

expression to the two options open to women - to fight or to submit. The woman who fights is magnificent. She turns upon a drunken lout who has clouted a young boy, and loosens upon him a tirade of vituperation which sweeps all before it in its surge of vigorous anger. She combines, in one brilliant flood of words, her antagonism towards men and her fellow-feeling for other women in their hard work and misery. The energy of her speech lashes at the man like a physical weapon, completely cowing his brutal spirit:

'What do you strike the boy for, you brute?' exclaims a slipshod woman, with two flat irons in a little basket. 'Do you think he's your wife you willin? ... 'Oh! you precious wagabond! (rather louder) Where's your wife, you willin? (louder still; women of this class are always sympathetic, and work themselves into a tremendous passion on the shortest notice.) Your poor dear wife as you uses worser nor a dog - strike a woman - you a man! (very shrill) I wish I had you - I'd murder you, I would, if I died for it!'<sup>20</sup>

The man's attempt to frighten her by physical threats soon gives way to sullen silence and the élan of the performance belies the bravery in taking on a bully like this. However, the alternative to this aggressive response is soon made apparent when the man's meek-spirited wife turns up. His appreciation of her gentle plea to 'come home, there's a good fellow, and go to bed', is shown by a violent blow which knocks her and their sickly child out of the shop, and in like manner he vents his drunken temper on them both all the way to their home.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> S.B., p. 192.

<sup>21</sup> S.B., p. 193.

In the harsh world of the London slum as depicted here, Dickens makes it quite clear that women who are not prepared to bite first are likely to be badly mauled themselves. No conclusion could seem more obvious than this from the scene in the pawnshop, and yet, reading the passage in its entirety, one is left with the feeling that Dickens's conscious approval lies with the second woman, the passive victim, rather than with the one he creates with such a magnificent fighting spirit. There is a cool distance, edged with the slightest ironic disapproval, between the authorial voice in brackets - 'women of this class' - and the vibrant passion of the woman's actual speech.

Nancy, in Oliver Twist, is more a victim than a fighter, but the same division between what seems to be Dickens's moral attitude and his dramatic presentation is apparent again at certain moments when Nancy does show some anger or spirit. When she rouses herself to protect Oliver from Fagin, causing him to shrink 'involuntarily back a few paces', Dickens undoubtedly approves and uses the occasion to demonstrate the cowardice of the Jew.<sup>22</sup> However, when Nancy meets Rose Maylie, he explicitly declares shame to be the better feeling than pride, and condemns her spirited opening retort to Rose, 'It's a hard matter to get to see you, lady', with which she attempts to protect herself from a sense of degradation.<sup>23</sup> 'Womanly feeling,' he declares to be that which 'alone [would have] connected her with humanity' -

<sup>22</sup> O.T., p. 115.

<sup>23</sup> O.T., p. 301.



by which he presumably means tears and submission.<sup>24</sup> In fact, not only is Nancy a more convincing character in her instinctive defiance of the scorn she expects from someone as respectable as Rose Maylie, she is also more genuinely pathetic at this moment of attempted bravado than during her later abject admission of her polluted state. The nerveless artificiality of the standard English in her later conversation with Rose ('I am the infamous creature you have heard of ... the poorest women fall back, as I make my way along the crowded pavement')<sup>25</sup> makes a poor contrast to the colloquial vigour of her sharp opening retort and of her rages at Fagin. A similar contrast exists between the forceful dialect of the fighting woman's language in the pawnshop and the flatness of the poor wife's standard English. Through their dramatic speech at least, Dickens recognizes the healthy, energizing quality of these women's anger. In an early passage in Oliver Twist he acknowledges quite clearly the importance of anger as a means of arousing the self-respect of the oppressed. Oliver abjectly bears all the bullying inflicted upon him by Noah Claypole, until the latter kindles his rage with insulting taunts about his dead mother:

A minute ago, the boy had looked the quiet, mild, dejected creature that harsh treatment had made him. But his spirit was roused at last; the cruel insult to his dead mother had set his blood on fire. His breast heaved; his attitude was erect; his eye bright and vivid; his whole person changed, as he stood glaring over the cowardly tormentor who now lay crouching at his feet; and defied him with an energy <sup>26</sup> he had never known before.

<sup>24</sup> O.T., p. 301.

<sup>25</sup> O.T., p. 302

<sup>26</sup> O.T., pp. 41-2.

Yet despite such explicit passages, Dickens's attitude to anger remains ambiguous. Often his consciously moral right hand seems curiously unaware of what is being suggested by his sly, intuitive left.

The Marchioness in The Old Curiosity Shop, for example, with her sharp little mind set on outwitting her tormentors, her resilience, and her resourcefulness, constantly sabotages Dickens's aim of putting forward Little Nell as the paradigm of female perfection. Few readers would willingly exchange the pleasing astringency of the Marchioness for the passive goodness of poor, doomed Nell. The hand of death is on Little Nell in more ways than one, but the Marchioness, like her friend Dick Swiveller, is one of fiction's 'Liverers'.

The Marchioness is so obviously victimized by the Brasses that her sharpness does not arouse Dickens's fears, but the servant, Miggs, in Barnaby Rudge, is one of his most harshly presented characters - as callous a caricature of an unattractive, sex-starved spinster as anything written by Smollett. Miggs kindles Dickens's authorial hostility because her anger is directed against one of those male characters he most admires - jovial, lusty, patriarchal Gabriel Varden. While the narrator is in control of the tone, Miggs remains a stock comic character, but at times, in direct speech, Dickens allows her a frenzy of bitter words revealing depths of feeling about her situation for which he makes no allowance in the surface texture of the novel. At the end, especially, where she breaks in upon the cosy, self-congratulatory little family party at the Vardens, only to



be snubbed by her former mistress, the unease between explicit and implicit values in the novel threatens to become serious. It is impossible not to feel that her denunciation of the family is well-founded, and that she is made the scapegoat on whom Dickens can safely unload the guilt and punishment which more fittingly should have been directed at Mrs Varden. The role of Miggs in the novel is not truly comic at all. Having no status within the family, and no claims to value according to the stereotyped ideal of feminine charms, as exhibited by Dolly Varden, Miggs is totally dependent for any sense of personal worth upon the travesty of female friendship existing between herself and her mistress. Her anger is but the most transparent covering for the deprivation of respect, status and affection in her life. Although Dickens takes no account of the pressures of such underlying feeling in the novel, sending Miggs on to a stereotyped fate as female turnkey at the county Bridewell, he does return for a second more sympathetic look at the same subject in the person of Tattycoram in Little Dorrit. In this later novel the anger is certainly treated with more generosity and complexity, but again one of Dickens's patriarchal males, Mr Meagles, allows him to evade many of the implications his dramatic art raises.

This division between Dickens's consciously held attitude towards anger and his underlying imaginative sympathy with it, is explored extensively by John Carey, but surprisingly, he does not include in his discussion any of these angry working-class women, and for this reason, perhaps, he fails



to connect the power of anger in Dickens's imagination with his sense of social realities.<sup>27</sup> Rage for Dickens is not just an exciting indulgence in destruction, as Carey implies, but also a source of life. For those who are oppressed and denied regard by society he sees it as the only means of human survival. It is a protestation of personal worth, and for Dickens self-respect is the base from which all other human virtues spring. This aspect of anger is present in Dickens's portrayal of working-class women from the very beginning, but not until his final novel does he come to terms unambiguously with his own knowledge. Although Jenny Wren is possibly the angriest and most vicious of all his shrewish women, it is through her that he finally articulates, with perfect adequacy, the relation between the cause and the function of anger in working-class women. In the whole dramatic presentation of Jenny Wren it is made abundantly apparent that her courage is inseparable from her ever-present anger. Robert Garis makes the perceptive point that Jenny Wren's anger 'seems an act of life. It has an absolute authority as a response to human suffering'.<sup>28</sup>

Sairey Gamp's anger is also 'an act of life' and as such it is connected to the central theme of Martin Chuzzlewit. In this earlier novel, however, Dickens is still unsure of the validity of such a response and this uncertain attitude is responsible, perhaps, for the sharp division of opinion about her role among critics, some seeing her as an almost

<sup>27</sup> Carey, pp. 11-29.

<sup>28</sup> Garis, p. 250.

mythic being, and others as an example of sordid self-seeking as much in need of unmasking as Pecksniff.<sup>29</sup> Gissing attempts to get nearer the duality of Mrs Gamp. He claims: 'Meeting her in the flesh, we should shrink disgusted ... Yet, when we encounter her in the pages of Dickens, we cannot have too much of Mrs Gamp's company'.<sup>30</sup> Dickens, he concludes, has idealized Mrs Gamp, leaving the vulgarity but bowdlerizing her vileness. Gissing is wrong about this, plenty of nastiness remains in the conception of Sairey and is fundamental to issues with which Dickens himself is concerned in the widest possible way in the whole novel.

In the nineteenth century it was still common to use Eve's weakness before Satan and her seduction of Adam into sin as a justification for women's inferior status and greater physical sufferings, especially those of childbirth. The numerous references in Martin Chuzzlewit to the Genesis and Miltonic myths of creation and of man's expulsion from Eden, which begin with the very first sentence of the novel and proliferate extravagantly from then onwards, indicate that these provide Dickens with an imaginative starting point. Eden, in both Biblical and Miltonic accounts, is characterized

<sup>29</sup> J. Hillis Miller, for example, sees Mrs Gamp as 'the cul-de-sac' of 'total selfishness', Charles Dickens, The World of his Novels, Midland book edition (London, 1969), p. 121. For Steven Marcus, on the other hand, she is 'a female Old Mortality, one of the guardians of human destiny', From Pickwick to Dombey (London, 1965), p. 263.

<sup>30</sup> Gissing, p. 89.



by the peaceful harmony and fruitful abundance of all creation. This vision of a paradisial garden, often linked with the idea of a promised land flowing with milk and honey, has formed, throughout the history of Christian civilization, a powerful inspiration to men's imaginative aspirations, whether they are dreaming of pastoral ideals, future Utopias or merely emigrating to the brave new opportunities of the untamed American wilderness. In such settings, it is felt, man as noble savage will cast off the taints of civilization and regain his lost innocence and the harmony with the universe which were lost through sin. This desire has perpetually rekindled men's hopes of achieving a more ideal existence, either metaphysically through death or a rebirth of the spirit, or materially through the creation of a better society or the rediscovery of a more primitive pattern of life. Without doubt, Dickens himself entertained some such hopeful ideal when he set out to experience the new democracy across the Atlantic.

In Milton's version of the myth the inherently luxurious growth of nature, a manifestation of the profuse bounty of God's creative will, was to be kept in check by Adam and Eve, the world's first gardeners. This idea of the necessity of controlling the otherwise excessive vitality of the natural world is one of Dickens's key concepts in his novel. With the Fall from grace, the control imposed by God through Adam is lost, harmony dissolves into warring violence, and the very process of creation is divided against itself in the opposition of life and death. Man himself is subjected to



their dominion and his experience of their terrors symbolizes the suffering inflicted on all nature through his sin. Mrs Gamp as midwife and watcher by the dead is obviously conceived as a central figure in a novel which is structured around such concerns.

The world of Martin Chuzzlewit is emphatically post-Fall. Death and images of death are omnipresent. The garden has become the graveyard, claiming, like Eden in America, not only men's physical bodies, but also their hopes and dreams. The language of every character in the novel reveals the same obsession, from the young, like Mark Tapley, who talks of taking work in 'the grave-digging way', to old Anthony Chuzzlewit who cries in hysterical fear that death has no right to 'mow' him down and leave old Chuffey standing.<sup>31</sup> Anthony's view of death as an active force is upheld by the rest of the novel in which many characters die or are dying. So insidious is its power that at times it seems to encroach upon the whole natural universe, making it one vast funeral - 'the earth covered with a sable pall as for the burial of yesterday; the clumps of dark trees, its giant plumes of funeral feathers, waving sadly to and fro'.<sup>32</sup> As in nature, so too in the human world. When Mrs Gamp watches by the sick-bed of Lewsome it is as if the whole city dies for the night, 'the distant noises in the streets were gradually hushed; the house was quiet as a sepulchre;

<sup>31</sup> M.C., pp. 68, 304.

<sup>32</sup> M.C., p. 245.

the dead of night was confined in the silent city'.<sup>33</sup>

In the fallen world as Dickens envisages it in Martin Chuzzlewit, even the force of life which should combat death seems to have come under its sway. With the loss of control which disciplined growth in Eden, the garden degenerates into a wilderness. The anarchic vitality of natural life leads to excessive, rank growth and finally to the proliferating, sickly generation of the American Eden where all matter is relapsing into a state of formless, primeval chaos:

Their own land was mere forest. The trees had grown so thick and close that they shouldered one another out of their places, and the weakest, forced into shapes of strange distortion, languished like cripples. The best were stunted, from the pressure and want of room; and high about the stems of all grew long rank grass, dank weeds, and frowsy underwood; not divisible into their separate kinds, but tangled altogether in a heap; a jungle deep and dark, with neither earth nor water at its roots, but putrid matter, formed of the pulpy offal of the two, and their own corruption. <sup>34</sup>

Although fallen man has lost his sense of harmony with the universe, Dickens constantly expresses in Martin Chuzzlewit a belief that human beings are part of the natural world, and, like all physical life, subject to the same laws and influences. Old Martin's description of society as 'brother against brother, child against child, friends treading on the faces of friends', illustrates the human counterpart of the unnatural growth of trees in Eden.<sup>35</sup> Trees in city churchyards are said to

<sup>33</sup> M.C., p. 413.

<sup>34</sup> M.C., p. 381. It is possible that some vague, Malthusian fear of over-population may lurk behind this rather emotional imagery, despite the fact that Dickens consistently attacked and ridiculed calls upon the poor to restrict the size of their families.

<sup>35</sup> M.C., p. 39.



languish like birds in cages, while in their turn these languish in Poll Sweedlepipe's shop until they are used as target practice by sporting gentlemen in the city. Completing this unison of life in captivity is Merry Chuzzlewit, trapped in her husband's gloomy city house and of whom Pecksniff, her father, had blandly prophesied, 'Years will tame down the wildness of my foolish bird, and then it will be caged'.<sup>36</sup> However, the energy which creates and animates all these forms of life cannot be forever restricted in this way. When old Anthony Chuzzlewit falls into his fatal fit: 'It was frightful to see how the principle of life, shut up within his withered frame, fought like a strong devil, mad to be released, and rent its ancient prison house'.<sup>37</sup> In a vast magnification of this struggle within an individual the same principle of life inhabiting the cosmic forces of wind and storm bursts free upon the open ocean - 'Free from that cramped prison called the earth, and out upon the waste of waters'.<sup>38</sup>

It is indeed the unchecked freedom of this strong devil within, this fierce life force in men, which seems to cause most of the problems which Dickens is examining in Martin Chuzzlewit, rather than its restraint. Without control it appears as the unbridled egoism typified by so many of the characters in the novel and leads to their excesses of greed, lust and violence. The anarchy of self which dominates

<sup>36</sup> M.C., p. 327.

<sup>37</sup> M.C., p. 307.

<sup>38</sup> M.C., p. 245.



American life is more unchecked, as are all things on that side of the Atlantic, but it is not different in kind from that in England. As Martin's friend, Mr Bevan, points out, 'I reckon [Americans] are made of pretty much the same stuff as other folks'.<sup>39</sup> Dickens echoes these words back in England in a conversation between Jonas and Tigg. 'Whichever it is, I daresay I'm no worse than other men,' said Jonas. 'Not a bit,' said Tigg, 'Not a bit. We're all alike - or nearly so'.<sup>40</sup> Tigg is proved correct not only by Jonas, but also by the rampant egoism which sets Chuzzlewits against Spottletoes, and Spottletoes against Pecksniff, and all of them against all other comers. The thrusting, aggressive growth of self, like the unchecked growth of the Eden swamp, appears to lead inevitably towards chaos, destruction and corruption. Here too in fallen human nature, excessive life only lapses back into death.

Sairey Gamp seems, at first sight, but one more example of the unbridled, weed-like, self-seeking of a fallen world, with the undisciplined excesses of her speech mirroring the formless chaos of a society in which, Babel-like, individuals harken only to the voices of their own desires. Sairey makes a fitting inhabitant of a fallen world, her nature given over entirely to self-interest and her person slovenly with the effects of self-indulgence - a wheezing, boozy, fawning, quarrelsome, greedy old woman. Dickens stresses to the full

<sup>39</sup> M.C., p. 292.

<sup>40</sup> M.C., p. 637.

all the unpleasantness of her type. He shows her by turn flattering every potential employer, greedy for free food, devious and cunning in obtaining her supply of drink, exploiting the weak, negligent and unsympathetic towards her patients, and always unsavoury, hovering drunkenly close in her stale, smelly clothes, leering and winking with assumed familiarity. She is the very parody of any ideal of service to others which her profession should represent; service to self motivates almost every act she performs.

Watching her callous treatment of Old Chuffy it seems surprising that any female clients return to her for subsequent deliveries. However, Dickens never shows her attending a birth. Like other working-class women in his fiction it is men who arouse her aggressive instincts. In fact, when Merry Chuzzlewit first comes home with her new husband, Mrs Gamp's reaction suggests a sense of genuine sympathy, although she is too politic to betray this to Jonas. As she watches Merry hustled aboard the steamer for Antwerp she is loud in her indignation at Jonas's unfeeling behaviour, and against men in general. 'Ugh!', she apostrophises the boat, 'one might easy know you was a man's inwention, from your disregardlessness of the weakness of our natures - so one might, you brute!'<sup>41</sup> On this occasion she is rudely aggressive to Tom Pinch, but Ruth she addresses immediately as 'my sweet', and 'my dear young creature'.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> M.C., p. 626.

<sup>42</sup> M.C., pp. 624-5.

Women, providing they could turn a blind eye to her unhygienic habits, might not have too much to fear from Mrs Gamp's attendance, and might even draw strength from her earthy brand of stoicism. Betsey Prig is another case altogether, as even Gissing recognizes, and it is significant that Dickens suggests her far more aggressive and selfish character by the masculine qualities of beard and deep voice. Mrs Prig never relents into even Mrs Gamp's assumed geniality and Dickens associates her name, not Sairey's, with the worst cruelties of current nursing practice - 'the Prig school of nursing'.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, Betsey with her arid spitefulness does more for Mrs Gamp's reputation, with readers of the novel at least, than even Mrs Harris. If Dickens had really intended Sairey Gamp as a serious indictment of nursing standards he should have made her more like her friend. The fact that most readers respond to Mrs Gamp quite differently from the way they respond to his really unpleasant characters of equal comic vitality, like Grandfather Smallweed in Bleak House for example, suggests that there is more to her than this.

Part of the complexity of our response to Sairey is that her sharp, selfish nature is as firmly locked into the reality of her social situation as Jenny Wren's is in Our Mutual Friend. 'She was a fat old woman, this Mrs Gamp, with a husky voice and a moist eye, which she had a remarkable power of turning up, and only showing the white of it'.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup> M.C., p. 709.

<sup>44</sup> M.C., p. 313.



How closely Dickens seems to comprehend her already when he introduces her. The casual familiarity of 'this Mrs Gamp' implies a total grasp of his subject. The presentation of Sairey Gamp is immersed in the active bustle of city life. She is a richly detailed part of a dynamic human scene. Her window is easily assailable at night 'by pebbles, walking sticks, and fragments of tobacco-pipe' and when not at home she is to be found engaged in tussles with cab-drivers, jostling to the front of a crowded quay, or mobbed by street urchins taking advantage of her tipsy meandering through the streets.<sup>45</sup> Drunk or indignant, Sairey is always a part of the lower city life which has nurtured her, sharing its class attitudes in scaling her charges to suit her patients' wealth ('eighteenpence a day for working people and three-and-six for gentlefolks'), its mixture of class prejudice and biblical literalness in morality ('Rich folks may ride on camels, but it ain't so easy for 'em to see out of a needle's eye'), and its epicurean delight in such spicy luxuries as pickled salmon, 'cowcumber' and best snuff.<sup>46</sup> It is a world which provides scant opportunities for developing the nicest qualities of moral behaviour. Like Mrs Todgers, but at an even lower social level, Sairey Gamp's survival depends upon her keeping her eye fixed relentlessly on the main chance. She is never present in the novel without some reference to her struggle to make a living. 'It is not a easy matter, gentlemen, to live when you are left

<sup>45</sup> M.C., p. 310.

<sup>46</sup> M.C., pp. 314, 407.

a widder woman', she tells Jonas and Pecksniff, and to Mr Mould she admits, 'I am but a poor woman, and I earns my living hard'.<sup>47</sup> One could multiply such examples. This obsession in her speech betrays the grip of necessity which Dickens knows presses continually upon the poor. Mrs Gamp eats her daily bread only by dint of long daily labour, performing offices which few would willingly undertake. If her customers run out, so does her food, hence her need to ingratiate herself everywhere and waste no opportunity of inveigling herself into favour and prominence.

Yet how splendidly she transcends sordid necessity. With Sairey, touting and politicizing are transmuted into 'the highest walk of art'. In the scene where she visits Mr Mould her performance is superb; breathtaking in its sustained and inventive interweaving of obsequious admiration, self-praise, special pleading, jokes, insinuations, gossip and homespun philosophy. But in all of this Dickens never loses touch with the essentials of her character, or with their social origin. The deliberate flattery with which she sugars her reception by Mr Mould and his family plays effectively upon their family pride and affections, but it arises too in Mrs Gamp's own natural interests and attitude to life. The secret of Mrs Gamp's success is that she enjoys her own act. She both shares in and exploits the popular interest in growing families, births and weddings. There is a large common humanity in Sairey's zest for burials and

<sup>47</sup> M.C., pp. 317, 406.

births, and all accidents in between, which gives a vital pulse to even her most flagrant acts of hypocrisy.

The apparently effortless energy with which she sustains her part should not completely bedazzle us as to what is involved. Mrs Gamp is a woman alone in the world. In the novel she frequently pushes herself into rooms filled with family groups, or with people well-known to each other, and always she fills the interrogative silence with words. The resilience of her spirit expresses itself most fully in her unfailing ability to conquer unfamiliarity, coldness and criticism by throwing a bridge of words across any social chasm.

Mrs Gamp's motto is that of the Chartists - peaceably if I may, forcibly if I must. Beneath her affability and servility there is always the readiness to fight if necessary. At Jonas's house she comes 'sidling and bridling' into the room, her very movement indicative of the simultaneous desire to mollify while aggressively insisting upon her 'rules and regulations ... which cannot be broke through'.<sup>48</sup> What happens to nicer, more gentle women in the fallen society of Martin Chuzzlewit or of Victorian England generally, Dickens shows very clearly in the experiences of Mary, Ruth Pinch at her London employers, and Merry after her marriage. Mrs Gamp too has fought out the battle for survival with her own husband whose wooden leg walked with great constancy into wine-vaults and never came out again 'till fetched by force'.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup> M.C., p. 317.

<sup>49</sup> M.C., p. 625.



Perhaps on one such forceful occasion Sairey lost her teeth, but, like the supreme survivor she is, she outlives her husband and revenges the teeth by disposing of Gamp's remains to science. Not a nice thing to do, but Sairey does not live in a nice world. Despite all we know about her, we are compelled to admire this tough resilience of spirit, and her unfailing appetite for life. A large part of her attraction in the novel is that she does not submit like the other women, but fights back with every weapon at her disposal - anger, hypocrisy, lies, flattery, even violence. There is a strong impulse of the devil in Sairey, and this ensures that she survives in her fallen world more effectively than by any moral virtue. Her affinity to the cosmic and mythic structure of the novel lies less in any claims for her divinity like those put forward by Steven Marcus than in the resemblance of her aggressive vitality to the spirit of the wind, or the principle of life struggling within Anthony Chuzzlewit. This strength is a gift, not of the gods, but of the lower-class city life from which she has sprung.

The unchecked egoism of fallen men, manifesting itself in greed and deeds of violence, inevitably brings deceit into the world - marking out the victory of the Prince of Lies over innocence. Transparency of motivation is possible only in Paradise; in this world as Sairey Gamp says, 'we never knows wot's hidden in each other's hearts; and if we had glass winders there, we'd need keep the shetters up, some on us, I do assure you'.<sup>50</sup> Thus, outward show to deceive others begins

<sup>50</sup> M.C., p. 464.

to usurp substance, as in the ostentatious display of Tigg's Life Assurance Company, and the Pecksniff family's elaborate performance of rural innocence. In this way, reality itself, as men experience it, begins that slide, typical of fallen nature, into undifferentiated chaos. Real men like Old Chuffy become 'an embodiment of nothing', so little do they impinge upon the egoistic consciousness of others.<sup>51</sup> At the funeral of Anthony Chuzzlewit each living man 'feasts like a Ghoul' and the passengers travelling with Martin and Mark to Eden are like 'melancholy shades'.<sup>52</sup> In a similar way, real experience begins to dissolve into dream, while nightmare, as for Tigg, materializes into horrible actuality. Old Chuffy, revealing the truth long hidden about Anthony Chuzzlewit's death, voices the hallucinatory experiences of many characters in the novel: 'Sometimes I have had it all before me in a dream: but in the day-time, not in sleep. Is there such a kind of dream?'<sup>53</sup>

As the references to Babel within the text imply, language is the prime tool by which this confusion of reality is actively sought by so many. Montague Tigg marks the point where falsity of language can cause the whole basis of shared reality to collapse into meaningless jumble. 'Don't say the truth,' he insists, 'It's so like humbug'.<sup>54</sup> Language is the fundamental means by which men generally, and not just

<sup>51</sup> M.C., p. 178.

<sup>52</sup> M.C., pp. 320, 375.

<sup>53</sup> M.C., p. 781.

<sup>54</sup> M.C., p. 442.

those in Martin Chuzzlewit, fabricate those false ideals with which they veil the nefarious pursuit of their own self-interest. Appeals to pastoralism like Pecksniff's, Scadder's and Tigg's glossy sales talk, and the whole American rhetoric of freedom and the dignity of man, which Dickens had experienced for himself while there, are seen by him as exploiting genuine human aspirations for a better life, a nobler nature, and a more liberated form of society. By so doing, they further the worst kind of death; rendering the highest ideals of a fallen world meaningless other than as traps for the gullible.

As one would expect from the birthplace of capitalism, the deceptive rhetoric of London is the worship of gold. As an American tells Martin, England 'has piled up golden calves as high as Babel, and worshipped 'em for ages'.<sup>55</sup> But so pervasive is falsity in the society Dickens depicts in the novel that even the innocent and good are liable to raise altars to false gods in their own hearts. Mary's idealization of Martin, and Tom Pinch's of Pecksniff, unwittingly add to the general undermining of reality. When Tom's hero is revealed as a man of clay Tom realizes that his perception of everything about him is involved in the change. 'Oh! What a different town Salisbury was in Tom Pinch's eyes to be sure, when the substantial Pecksniff of his heart melted away into an idle dream'.<sup>56</sup> Not only the world of things changes

<sup>55</sup> M.C., p. 349.

<sup>56</sup> M.C., p. 556.



radically for Tom, he becomes aware too of aspects of human nature previously hidden from him. Meeting Cherry Pecksniff he notices 'something hidden'<sup>57</sup> in her manner, and begins to replace some of his false idealism with more worldly truth, like Sairey's, as to men's need to keep 'the shetters up'.

What Tom begins to perceive is that all men, like his mysterious landlord, Nadgett, are profoundly secretive by nature. The human heart, as Todgers, is at the centre of a labyrinth and few can follow the winding path there without a guide. Even Tom and his sister Ruth hide secrets in their hearts, although these involve only love for others. The secret sheltered by most characters in the novel is self-love, naked egoism, which unless controlled by social bonds becomes an ever stronger, more unruly force within them. When Jonas is taken off the steamer for Antwerp by Tigg, he looks as if he has a 'sullen' and 'suppressed devil' within him which he cannot quite resist. Instead of fighting to control the impulse he gives way completely to his hidden self, preparing to murder Tigg, and the triumphant devil within emerges to absorb the whole man:

It was now growing dark. As the gloom of the evening, deepening into night, came on, another dark shade, emerging from within him, seemed to overspread his face, and slowly change it. Slowly, slowly; darker and darker; more and more haggard; creeping over him by little and little; until it was black-night within 58  
him and without.

It is clearly in the context of a world ('the valley of the shadow' as Sairey calls it) of dissolving reality, secret

<sup>57</sup> M.C., p. 581.

<sup>58</sup> M.C., pp. 717-718.

selves, and false idealizations that the fiction of Mrs Harris must be considered. The function of this lady seems very similar to Pecksniff's deceptive projection of himself as a guileless innocent. Mrs Harris, too, is intended to disarm any possible suspicion or criticism of Sairey and her methods, being 'a phantom of Mrs Gamp's brain ... created for the express purpose of holding visionary dialogues with her on all manner of subjects, and invariably winding up with a compliment to the excellence of her nature'.<sup>59</sup> However, unlike Pecksniff, there is not a trace of evidence in the novel to suggest that anyone ever takes the slightest notice of Mrs Harris's recommendations. Indeed, they are too often lost amidst the profusion of Mrs Gamp's expansive dialogues to have much of the desired effect. As already noted Mrs Gamp lives in a hard world, one full of jealousy and competition, where even the supportive friendship among women partakes of the weakness of fallen nature, and all too often ends in the mutual recriminations of Sairey's fatal tea-party with Betsey Prig. Around the figure of Mrs Harris, Sairey creates an ideal of feminine comradeship, embodying all the virtues of affection, sincerity and respect which are wholly absent from her sordid, striving existence. After Betsey Prig's brutal assault upon her myth, Mrs Gamp turns instinctively for comfort to a vision of herself as a loved and much-needed part of a caring, intimate family circle, with little Tommy Harris waiting anxiously at the window for

<sup>59</sup> M.C., p. 404.

'his own Gammy'.<sup>60</sup> Mrs Harris is much more necessary to Sairey as a means of shielding her self-respect from the knowledge of what she actually is, than as a means of deluding others with a false sense of her virtues. In the fantasy of this imaginary friend Sairey creates that little oasis of an ideal world with which hard-pressed women protect themselves from too much reality. While she can believe in Mrs Harris, she can respect herself and thus sustain her defiant stance to the world. It is for this very good reason that when Betsey leaves her she murmurs the magic name of Harris 'as if it were a talisman against all earthly sorrows'.<sup>61</sup>

However, Mrs Harris is to be seen as something more positive than merely a psychological defence against hard reality. On the contrary, in a novel dominated by death, Mrs Gamp, midwife, brings forth life in great imaginative abundance. Nowhere else in the story do we get such a vivid impression of the crowding details - bizarre, comic, tragic - of human experience as from Sairey's saga of her fictional family. Far from creating a delusionary ideal with which to fool the innocent, her narrative becomes a glorious celebration of the actualities which make up existence in the world. The unflagging, inventive energy with which she constructs the Harris myth is unrestrained by any mimetic discipline, and yet, for all that, Sairey's prolific art, like her creator's,

<sup>60</sup> M.C., p. 759.

<sup>61</sup> M.C., p. 759.



draws its vitality from a responsive, popular zest for the materials, accidents and chronicles of life as she knows and enjoys it. Life and reality are constantly in retreat in Martin Chuzzlewit, but Sairey Gamp fights back against the death principle, breathing vigorous life into a fiction.

The most famous celebration of life in the novel, and justifiably so, is the dinner at Todgers which introduces the Pecksniff ladies to the lodgers. This meal shares many of the qualities of that celebratory meal in Pickwick Papers between Tony Weller and his fellow cabmen. On both of these occasions 'Every man comes out freely in his own character', in order to add to the communal impressiveness, not to enlarge their own egos at the expense of others.<sup>62</sup> Both celebratory acts, like Sairey's narratives, intensify the reality they thus create without distorting or falsifying it. By a liberating flight of imagination Todgers becomes 'true to itself' - the aspirations of the lodgers and reality meet.<sup>63</sup> The 'paradise within' of imagination is actualised in the real world. Todgers represents the heart of the city in the novel, that is of the world of men. Dickens is thus providing here an image of what a true freeing of the secret self within men's hearts could aspire to - not an obsessive egoism trampling down others to feed its own desires, but the discovery of true selfhood in the self-liberating, self-delighting bringing into being of a communal ideal of good fellowship.

<sup>62</sup> M.C., p. 147.

<sup>63</sup> M.C., p. 147.

What separates such expansive celebration from false idealization is that it irradiates all participants with mutual glamour at the expense of none. Even the idealizations of Mary and Tom Pinch have the tendency to make them depreciate themselves in relation to those they worship. Young Martin Chuzzlewit's expansive daydreams in which he builds imaginative castles in the air of his future glory may help him transcend his inglorious present dependency upon his grandfather, but he gains his effect by diminishing Tom Pinch with his patronizing condescension. Notably, while the fiction of Mrs Harris may be intended to elevate its teller, the expansive ideal of family life which it celebrates imposes no diminution of self-respect on any of those who listen, but rather it offers an inclusive account of the most basic of human idylls, in which all men, like the gentlemen at Todgers, can be true to their private selves. One the one occasion when Sairey is tempted to use her myth competitively to put down Betsey, the illusion she has lovingly built is shattered by the other's 'cold philosophy'.

Clearly in a work so concerned with fictional creations and false ideals the question of literature itself cannot be excluded. Words in Martin Chuzzlewit are suspect - powerfully creative, but treacherous and seductive. Dickens is certainly fully conscious of his own extraordinary art in this novel, writing to Forster that he had never felt more sure of his genius. He enjoys drawing attention to his fictional devices and many passages are ostentatious in their display of inventive exuberance. Literary references

besprinkle the text - Shakespeare, Milton, Bunyan, Wordsworth, Fielding - and echoes from their work abound. That important values are being claimed for literature in the novel is obvious. It is dismissed contemptuously in America and at Montague Tigg's dinner party, while it is revered by Tom Pinch, whose favourite childhood books turn out to be, not surprisingly, Dickens's well-known favourites too. Despite all this, a certain ambiguity of attitude remains; while Dickens exults in the power of his chosen art, he yet seems to fear its strength. Tigg's rhetorical efforts on behalf of the Anglo-Bengali Life Insurance Company are referred to as 'the inventive and poetical department', and Pecksniff speaks knowingly of the 'siren-like delusions of art'.<sup>64</sup> Even the bookshops beloved of Tom Pinch are described as traps which, by opening first pages in the window, tempt unwary men 'to rush blindly in, and buy', thus deliberately inviting comparison with Scadder's Eden.<sup>65</sup> Dickens's experience of the insidious use of rhetoric in the United States had left him a bit uneasy about the powerful magic of words and their ability to create tempting visions of ideal worlds which could hide an empty or even corrupt reality. Was it possible that literature, too, and especially fiction, could abet the fallen world's attack upon reality and help precipitate a decline into the chaos of meaningless and anarchic forms?

<sup>64</sup> M.C., pp. 431, 59.

<sup>65</sup> M.C., p. 71.



Early in the story Tom Pinch lies virtuously to young Martin Chuzzlewit in order to lend him money, and the narrator breaks into one of his enthusiastic apostrophes - 'There are some falsehoods, Tom, on which men mount, as on bright wings towards heaven'.<sup>66</sup> True intent it seems is the guarantee which can keep fiction on the side of the angels, and Dickens's moral intentions as regards Martin Chuzzlewit are firmly imposed upon its narrative structure - the bad are all to be punished and the good rewarded. However, ambiguous feelings on the part of the author as not so easily controlled as Dickens imagines perhaps. Smoothed away in one part, they tend to pop up in another.

Take, for example, the attitude to wind, storm and water. The extended description of the activity of the wind in Chapter Two of the novel draws almost as much attention to itself as the fog in Bleak House. It is described in identical terms to Jonas Chuzzlewit - 'blustering', 'swaggering' and 'grumbling' - and such identity between man and nature is never accidental in this novel. Moreover, its attack upon a heap of dead leaves irresistibly suggests a bullying yeomanry attack upon an unarmed crowd, it does 'so disperse and scatter them, that they flee away pell-mell, some here, some there, rolling over each other ... in the extremity of their distress'.<sup>67</sup> At the beginning of Chapter Fifteen, wind and ocean together are even more dangerously disreputable and there can be no mistaking the reverberations Dickens is

<sup>66</sup> M.C., p. 213.

<sup>67</sup> M.C., p. 9.

deliberately provoking here both of the murder of Tigg by Jonas and of the wild anarchy of American society which Mark Tapley and Martin discover when they step off their wave-tossed steamer. The passion and fury of uncontrolled storm are a counterpart of the destructive energy of unrestrained human beings, sharing the same anarchic principle of life.

However, an unqualified negative interpretation of the elements in the novel is too simple. The wind which endangers the 'Screw' has also broken free from an earth which is described as 'death-like', a 'cramped prison', inhabited by 'Want, colder than Charity, shivering at street corners'.<sup>68</sup> Even the name of the ship menaced by the wind is suggestive of a constricted, ground-down kind of society. By contrast the wind is fully alive and vigorous; it possesses the same principle of life that struggles so fiercely to get free of old Anthony Chuzzlewit's decrepit body, or that keeps Sairey Gamp afloat in her harsh world of poverty and brutality. Could it be that destructive violence is necessary to overcome the restrictive prison of death-like forms in a fallen world? It is, after all, dead leaves that the wind harries at the beginning of the novel, and an old dragon which is knocked from its frame; the final act of the wind is to lay low Pecksniff. The description of the 'eternal strife' of the ocean where all is 'incessant change of place, and form, and hue' may seem to threaten that ever-present tendency in the natural world towards a formless chaos, but

<sup>68</sup> M.C., p. 245.

change of place and variety, as Tom Pinch discovers when he breaks free from his mental bondage to Pecksniff, can be 'startling, thrilling, vast' - again epithets which could apply equally to the wind or ocean.<sup>69</sup> The journey which Tom takes to London as his first free act becomes a celebration of speed and changing forms. In contrast to such active vigour displayed in motion, vitality and variety are the lounging, languid demeanour of most people in America, the monotonous sameness of all the women there, and the dank, unwholesome vegetation. In many of the American scenes Dickens creates such an intense sense of torpid lassitude that a strong, healthy wind is felt as an almost sensual need.

There is a striking similarity between the imagery of Martin Chuzzlewit and Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind'. The poem also opens with a description of the wind driving dead leaves 'like ghosts' and 'Pestilence-stricken multitudes'. There is, too, the pastoral reference to Spring '(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)', and the image of the wind able to 'cleave' the Atlantic's 'level powers' into 'chasms'. The yearly seasons are prominently linked to the cycle of birth and death in the poem, and the language used is strikingly like that in Martin Chuzzlewit: 'Thou dirge/ Of the dying year, to whom this closing night/Will be the dome of a vast sepulchre'. In the penultimate verse Shelley moves briefly from the wind to the image of fire - 'And, by the incantation of this verse,/ Scatter, as from an

<sup>69</sup> M.C., pp. 245, 557.



unextinguished hearth/Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind'.<sup>70</sup>  
 These lines suggest a possible explanation for the puzzling  
 introduction in Chapter Two of Dickens's novel of a forge  
 which, unlike the stream and Dragon Inn also mentioned, is  
 never heard of again as part of the village:

The lusty bellows roared Ha, ha! to the clear fire, which  
 roared in turn, and bade the shining sparks dance gaily  
 to the merry clinking of the hammers on the anvil. The  
 gleaming iron, in its emulation sparkled too, and shed  
 its red-hot gems around profusely. 71

'Lusty' is an important word in Dickens's vocabulary, often  
 used of men like Gabriel Varden, who, incidentally, is a  
 smith, and with whom Dickens seems to identify. Does he  
 perhaps see himself as a creative smith, forging 'red-hot  
 gems' on the anvil of his brain? Whether he had Shelley's  
 poem actually in mind as he wrote it is impossible to say,  
 but the similarity of language and imagery between the two  
 must suggest a similarity of attitude and thought. The wind  
 in Martin Chuzzlewit can be seen as both preserver and  
 destroyer, but does Dickens go so far as to cry with Shelley  
 'Be thou, Spirit fierce,/My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous  
 one!'<sup>72</sup>

The firm moral outline of the novel and its association  
 with much of this imagery would seem to rule out any such  
 radical possibility. The fountain which sparkles and splashes

<sup>70</sup> The Complete Poetical Works of Shelley, edited by Thomas  
 Hutchinson (Oxford, 1904), pp. 640-642.

<sup>71</sup> M.C., p. 8.

<sup>72</sup> Complete Poetical Works, p. 642.

while Ruth Pinch falls in love is able to contain all the lively qualities of the ocean, constant variety of form and motion, but none of its dangerous passion. Indeed, dangerous passion is the last quality to be associated with little Ruth Pinch. The lechery of Pecksniff has its safe and disciplined form in the respectable unions at the close of the narrative. In like manner, the rough power of the wind can be harnessed by bellows to produce disciplined, creative work. Significantly, the angry wind blusters around the merry forge in the village 'as if it bullied the jolly bellows for doing anything to order'.<sup>73</sup> Dickens's vocabulary in this entire passage is rather too insistent - 'jolly bellows', 'merry forge', 'cheerful song'. There is a straining after effect here which is never felt when Dickens is imaginatively, rather than morally, committed to what he is writing. However, the intended implication is clear enough. Lack of change, liberty and energy lead to lassitude, constriction, and finally death, but death and destruction are also the result of an excess of energy and freedom, either in the natural forces of wind and sea, or in human society. What is needed is a harnessing of the wild life principle by discipline and controlled order, as the pattern of water is shaped by the fountain, and the raw material by the smith's hammer, and language by conscientious writers.

Unlike Jonas Chuzzlewit's lawless rage, old Martin's anger with Pecksniff at the conclusion of the novel is

<sup>73</sup> M.C., p. 8.

characterized by control and order. He speaks of the villain with passion, but only 'if that can be called passion which was so resolute and steady'.<sup>74</sup> When he confronts Pecksniff, this genteel rage breaks out in righteous indignation, and, like the wind earlier, he fells Pecksniff with one blow, meting out justice like Jehovah, but even then he is restrained from excess by the swift intervention of those two moral referees, John Westlock and Mark Tapley. Thus old Martin is depicted as a disciplining agent in human society, who checks the rampant growth of egoism in the form of Pecksniffs and Mrs Gamps, both social weeds, to restore harmony in the human world, and allow space in which more honest growth, typified by Tom and Ruth Pinch, can flourish. The only problem is that this neatly-schemed solution to the question of freedom and control, raised throughout the novel, is itself far too narrow and restricted to fit over all the turbulent energies and challenges his own art has raised. This is an often repeated pattern in Dickens's fiction - the uncurbed, frequently anarchic, imaginative impulses of his texts reveal areas of human life of such complexity that the difficulties simply cannot be met by the safe and conventional answers he offers by way of narrative conclusion. In Martin Chuzzlewit his conscious moral intent is undermined throughout by two characters who themselves can be seen to represent the opposing forces of control and anarchy - Tom Pinch and Sairey Gamp.

<sup>74</sup> M.C., p. 772.



There can be no doubt that Tom is underwritten by his author. He represents all the highest virtues of a character whose egoism is completely controlled by an altruistic concern for the welfare of others, and by utter disregard of self. Tom positively enjoys sitting in cold, draughty places that other people may be warm, giving away his last penny and depreciating his own worth. Not only does Dickens as narrator frequently break into effusive praise of his virtue, he also seems to deliberately identify himself with this favourite character, sharing with him not only the childhood reading, but also his pride in a respectable grandmother - a gentleman's housekeeper. However, as with the passage describing the bellows at the forge, there is a continuous sense of straining for effect in the writing about Tom. In these passages Dickens protests too much. The Carlylean apostrophes disrupt the normal sinuous strength of Dickens's prose and the heightened rhetoric fails to cover a loss of real artistic involvement.

Tom Pinch is told by his friend, John Westlock, that he has not enough of the devil in him - a word which contains all the ambiguity of the novel. Only once is Tom's inner self roused to life, when he sees his sister insulted by her wealthy employer. Then his anger sends an unusual sensation like 'pins and needles' up and down his veins; the image itself suggestive of life returning to limbs normally numb or dead. A letter Dickens wrote while he was busy on Chuzzlewit gives a useful indication as to his preoccupation at the time with this question of anger. He tells his

correspondent, 'I have a strong spice of the devil in me; and when I am assailed as I think falsely or unjustly, my red hot anger carries me through it bravely'.<sup>75</sup> Tom is denied this energizing spice of devilry; he has a self-effacing meekness which is ultimately anti-life.

Dickens, as his letter reveals, is really not at all like Tom, who, we are told, is born an old man. He is, however, very like Young Bailey who watches with malicious glee the turbulent jealousy breaking out between Cherry and Merry Chuzzlewit until his uncontrollable delight manifests itself in 'the instantaneous performance of a dancing step, extremely difficult in its nature, and only to be achieved in a moment of ecstasy, which is commonly called the Frog's Hornpipe'.<sup>76</sup> Edgar Johnson describes how one evening the quiet of the Hogarth family drawing-room was disrupted when 'a young man dressed as a sailor jumped in at the window, danced a hornpipe, whistling the tune, jumped out again, and a few minutes later Charles Dickens walked gravely in at the door, as if nothing had happened, shook hands all round, and then, at the sight of their puzzled faces, burst into a roar of laughter'.<sup>77</sup>

Dickens's art, even more than his life, is full of 'moments of ecstasy' but when he disciplines this imaginative exuberance by the restrictive bellows of conventional

<sup>75</sup> The Letters of Charles Dickens, Pilgrim edition (Oxford, 1965-), III (1974), 493.

<sup>76</sup> M.C., p. 171.

<sup>77</sup> Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens, revised and abridged edition (London, 1977), p. 91.

expectations or self-conscious moral approval of over-virtuous characters like Tom Pinch he confines it to a cramped and death-like form. Far from safeguarding his art from the inherent seduction of language, such genteel moralizing decoys Dickens into a falsity only slightly less pernicious than that of Pecksniff's which he attacks. The mushy, pastoral idyll of the Pinches' pre-Fall innocence does not fleece the unsuspecting of their savings, but it does, by its very nature, betray Dickens's powerful indictment of false ideals, deceptive rhetoric and the suffering imposed on women in his society. Fortunately, like the principle of life in old Anthony Chuzzlewit, Dickens's creative will is never for long restrained by genteel bonds. It continually bursts out in sustained flights of imaginative energy which convey an exhilarating vision of human freedom - at once anarchic and creative. It suggests a universe in which all men, like the company at Todgers, can become true to their imaginative conceptions of themselves - as the wind upon the open spaces of the ocean, unbending in 'terrible disport'.<sup>78</sup>

Sairey Gamp is a superb manifestation of Dickens's unbridled imaginative energies. But her tremendous artistic vitality poses a continual challenge to his conscious authorial intention of upholding the need for

<sup>78</sup> M.C., p. 245.



control and order.<sup>79</sup> Dickens tries hard to curb the anarchic energy he has released into his work in the person of Sairey and bring her under the control of its moral structure. The myth of Mrs Harris is exploded, and Sairey herself is summoned to the Judgement-Day ending of the novel to be ticked off by old Martin like a naughty child, but, like Miggs in Barnaby Rudge and the Marchioness in The Old Curiosity Shop, Mrs Gamp sabotages the genteel values Dickens wishes to impose. The conception of Mrs Gamp, like that of Sam Weller, is so solidly established in her London working-class world, and we are led to appreciate so fully its consequences in the weaknesses and the strengths of her character that we cannot do other than reject impatiently the facile solution to her case proposed by old Martin: 'A little more humanity, and a little less regard for herself, and a little more regard for her patients, and perhaps a trifle of additional honesty'.<sup>80</sup> In an ideal world this might be sound advice, but Sairey does not live

79 James Kincaid's reading of Sairey Gamp's role within the novel is very similar; he sees her as a 'triumphant expression of selfhood', the centre of a competing morality within the work, as well as a 'lonely and courageous woman', although, of course, he stresses her comedy rather than her anger. Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter (London, 1971), pp. 133, 157, 159. David Marcus puts forward a similar, but less negative interpretation of Tom Pinch to that put forward in this chapter; Tom, he writes, is 'a double-edged character, one who functions as a critique of himself', Martin Chuzzlewit: The Art of the Critical Imagination, The Victorian Newsletter, 54 (1978), 10-16, (p. 11).

80 M.C., p. 814.

in Paradise. The irrelevance of Martin's priggish words, spoken in all the smugness of easy wealth, to the conditions of Mrs Gamp's life, reveals a wilful and ungenerous restriction of sympathy. There is more real moral truth to be discovered in Mrs Gamp's tough anger than in all the sweetness and virtue of the Pinches. The inventive energy which floods into Dickens's creation of her character pushes the restrictively genteel view of morality, centred in the novel upon old Martin, on to the wider, more generous, but more dangerously challenging scale of all great art.

While the surface issues of Martin Chuzzlewit all appear to be asserting the need for control and discipline, there is a subversive undercurrent flowing towards a contrary insistence upon freedom and energetic destruction of restrictive forms. The theme of self embraces not only the dangers of selfishness but also the perils of self-abnegation - both are anti-life. In the vitality and expansive self-love of urchin characters, like Young Bailey, Dickens presents his most positive image of liberated self-hood. It is one which has the closest affinity to his own art at its best. In Sairey Gamp, as in all his angry working-class women, Dickens dramatizes his own response to any curbing or crushing of this vital sense of life upon which self-respect and individuality depend. Humility like Tom Pinch's, he knows, cannot give dignity to the despised - only anger does this. Dickens shares the rage of his hard-pressed women. Despite his conscious control it races out of him into their vital, impassioned speech. The anger of women in Dickens's novel



is righteous anger like Christ's in the Temple, or Moses' when he ground the golden calf to dust, and like theirs it is not steady and controlled, but a wild, fierce impulse of indignation. The life-denying evils of society and men are not to be washed away by streams or fountains; flood, fire or revolution are needed - a mighty rushing wind. Dickens instinctively feels this, responds impetuously, but draws back in fear. Like his women he nurses his anger at the crippling social realities he sees restricting social life all around him, raises his pen to strike, and then again and again softens and modifies his meaning. In Martin Chuzzlewit this genteel attempt at restraint is centred upon the conscious approval of Tom Pinch and the reformed character of old Martin. However, beneath this respectable surface resolution of the novel, dialectical oppositions remain vitally alive.

The relation of artistic discipline to imaginative freedom, of creative integrity to moral purpose, of use and abuse of the power of language to create fictitious ideals, and the shadowy boundaries between all these areas is never explored more richly than in this novel. Moreover these problems are shown to be entirely merged with questions of social morality in its largest sense. Order and violence, rage and passivity oppose each other and each bring death as well as new life. Creative forces are anarchic and productive. Human aspiration soars towards a better vision of reality for men, but also beguiles them with a dead illusion, makes them vulnerable to false rhetoric. Good people may help to sustain



evil by their passivity, while evil often destroys evil. If Mrs Gamp were a better person she would be hard-pressed to exist at all. If Tom Pinch were less good he might be more artistically alive. There is no final separation of the different layers of interaction and opposition in the novel, and these unresolved artistic and social tensions create a sense of energy and excitement inexplicable in normal terms of narrative form, moral development or characterization. Martin Chuzzlewit has the rich poetic ambiguity of Blake's 'Tyger'. Essentially linked to the fusion of poetic and social vision in Dickens's early novels and their particular quality of creative energy are the two working-class types he chooses so frequently to depict in them, the street urchins like Sam Weller and the angry women like Sairey Gamp. These are not seen as either Rousseau's noble savages or as Wordsworth's dignified peasants, rather they are partakers of Shelley's impetuous spirit - full of anger, energy and liberated imagination.

PART THREE

PASSIVITY: THE MIDDLE NOVELS

CHAPTER 5David Copperfield - Flight to a Quiet Nook

Martin Chuzzlewit marks the end of the first prolific period of Dickens's career. Artistically it was one of intense activity and conquest. Each new novel brought a new form, and a different subject; tired old conventions were revitalized, familiar language exploded with comic invention, every page almost became a fresh experiment with the linguistic possibilities of prose. After Martin Chuzzlewit this furious pace slowed down. Dickens remained an innovative and experimental writer to his last novel, but the fireworks were over. Not too surprisingly, the characters who people his novels reflect this change from what could be termed conquest to consolidation. In the early novels the heroes and heroines set out bravely to overcome the difficulties in their path to success, while in the middle novels, from Dombey and Son through to Hard Times, the dominant mode is one of acceptance of circumstances, and fortunes do not change drastically within the course of the story. A comparison of the characters who at first might seem exceptions to such a generalization, in fact helps to reinforce it. Oliver Twist setting out for London is an essentially more adventurous and questing figure than David Copperfield running away from London to re-establish himself with his aunt at Dover. Little Nell's protective care of her grandfather leads from London and towards death, but still,



she is a more active figure than Florence Dombey. The typical working-class characters in the novels change too, from the activity and ebullience of the urchins and angry women to greater passivity and quietism.

The two types of working-class characters who predominate in this middle period of Dickens's fiction are probably those who correspond most closely to the popular image of what working-class figures are like in his novels. They include the virtuous, loving family groups like the Toodles in Dombey and Son, the Peggottys in David Copperfield, the Bagnets in Bleak House, and Stephen Blackpool and Rachel in Hard Times, although these last two are not a family, of course. The other main type comprises the social victims - Alice Marwood in Dombey and Son, and, in Bleak House, Jo; Guster, the families of the brickmakers, and the Necketts. Quite obviously none of these is as adventurous in artistic terms as Sam Weller or Sairey Gamp, but, nevertheless, in their roles within the fiction, and especially in the values they are shown to represent, they remain closely connected with Dickens's continuing social and imaginative preoccupations.

The qualities which Dickens always associates with working-class families like the Peggottys are centred upon the concept of the home as a place of warmth, security and shared feelings. There is nothing falsely sentimental about this. Although these qualities are not rooted in his novels in such a densely conceived material and social world as that which produces the typical traits of city urchins and sharp-

spirited women, they do realize genuine working-class sentiment. Working-class homes in the nineteenth century were not places of luxury, and many offered only squalor and misery, but still, for the majority, home was the centre of their affections and provided the only shelter and comfort, however minimal, they were likely to experience in a hard life. The songs and embroidered mottoes on the wall celebrating 'Home, sweet home' were not expressions of empty sentimentality, but of an ideal which held a genuine place in their expectations and experience of life.<sup>1</sup> The sense that home is the centre where all that is most real and important finds expression, as opposed to an outside world which tends to dehumanize and belittle, distinguishes working-class attitudes from those of other sections of society in which the men especially are likely to find fulfilment and distinction beyond the home and family. Even in this century, Richard Hoggart writes that the core of working-class attitudes is to be reached still in the idea of the family and the home: 'Where almost everything else is ruled from outside, is chancy and likely to knock you down

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Bamford's description of his feelings on returning home with his wife after his trial in London provides a typical example of the kind of sentiments which can be found in almost every piece of autobiographical writing by working-class people: 'We soon made ourselves comfortable in our own humble dwelling; the fire was lighted, the hearth was swept clean, friends came to welcome us, and we were once more at home.

"Be it ever so humble,

There's no place like home."

The Autobiography of Samuel Bamford, edited by W.H. Chaloner, 2 vols (London, 1967), II, 230.



when you least expect it, the home is yours and real: the warmest welcome is still "Mek y'self at 'ome'".<sup>2</sup> The three requirements of a good home, he writes, are gregariousness, warmth and food - the group though restricted is not private, 'most things are shared, including personality; "our Mam", "our Dad", "our Alice" are normal forms of address'.<sup>3</sup>

While each of Dickens's middle novels contains its virtuous family, the Nubbles are the only example to be found in his early work. With them he introduces the concept of the working-class home as a focus for virtues like affection, gregariousness, and true expression of feeling. 'And let me linger in this place for an instant', Dickens writes of the Nubbles' home, 'to remark that if ever household affections and loves are graceful things, they are graceful in the poor'.<sup>4</sup> As the elevated tone of this suggests, his sentiment remains at the level of virtuous declaration. The affections of the Nubbles family are never brought into fully realized dramatic life within the novel - they remain always slightly out of focus through that sentimental categorization as 'the poor'. However, in Dombey and Son the warm ties of affection and mutual care shown within the Toodle family provide a continually powerful contrast pointing to the death-like lack of love and shared feeling within the Dombey household. Much more than the

<sup>2</sup> The Uses of Literacy (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1958), p.34.

<sup>3</sup> Hoggart, p. 36.

<sup>4</sup> O.C.S., p. 281.



relationship between Walter Gay and his uncle, the Toodles provide that sense of warm human vitality without which the full measure of Mr Dombey's frigidity could not be so abundantly manifested. In this novel Dickens does not declaim the virtues of the humble home, but instead shows the instinctive kindness and compassion to be found there, with an understated tact and a sense of humour which shares in the feelings it describes without condescension. When Polly and her sister Jemima discuss Grinder's initiation into the charitable institution Mr Dombey's patronage makes available to him, their dialogue reveals, with Dickens's lightest touch, the quick, intuitive understanding existing between the two sisters:

'And how does he look, Jemima, bless him!' faltered Polly.

'Well, really he don't look so bad as you'd suppose,' returned Jemima.

'Ah!' said Polly, with emotion, 'I knew his legs must be too short.'

'His legs is short,' returned Jemima; 'especially 5 behind; but they'll get longer, Polly, every day.'

This lightness of effect and the constant play of humour obstructs any tendency towards that cloying sentimentality which overcomes so many Victorian writers once they are within range of the fireside.<sup>6</sup> At his best, Dickens creates in his portrayal of these respectable working-class families a resilient sense of the warmth and affectionate spontaneity of shared family life. Such scenes make a powerful

<sup>5</sup> D.S., p. 66.

<sup>6</sup> Dickens is not always so restrained in his short stories, as in Cricket on the Hearth for example, which seldom reaches beyond the level of moralising sentimentality.

contribution to the underlying belief in goodness which plays such an important role in the total conceptual world of his novels. Virtue in the form of a Little Nell, Florence Dombey, Esther Summerson, even a John Jarndyce, has a passive, self-denying quality which gets a much needed boost of energy from the vitality which irradiates from scenes like the one in Dombey and Son where Mr Toodle shares his meal with his young family:

In satisfying himself, however, Mr Toodle was not regardless of the younger branches about him, who, although they had made their own evening repast, were on the lookout for irregular morsels, as possessing a relish. These he distributed now and then to the expectant circle, by holding out great wedges of bread and butter, to be bitten at by the family in lawful succession, and by serving out small doses of tea in like manner with a spoon; which snacks had such a relish in the mouths of these young Toodles, that, after partaking of the same, they performed private dances of ecstasy among themselves, and stood on one leg apiece, and hopped, and indulged in other saltatory tokens of gladness.

This kind of spontaneity and affectionate vitality inhering in a loving home plays a central role in shaping the total meaning of David Copperfield, while in Bleak House the small Bagnet household is part of the positive contrast held against the image of an uncaring, neglectful State. The Boffins in Dickens's last completed novel are obviously intended to fill a very similar role within that work, but their presentation lacks the inventive freshness which characterizes these families in the middle period of his writing. Partly this must be because his sharpest imaginative

<sup>7</sup> D.S., pp. 534-5.



interest has moved on to a different type of working-class character, but it is also due to Dickens's inability to transplant the qualities he associates with working-class homes into a higher social setting. Once the Boffins leave the Bower they are adrift in a social vacuum, as lifeless as the great, old house they buy, and can only perform empty gestures in cold, hollow rooms. Mrs Boffin's continual clapping of her hands is really her creator's desperate attempt to bring back the warmth of life. To compare the scene in which Bella is reunited with the old couple with the scene in Dombey in which Mr Toodle feeds his family is to recognize how much imaginative vitality has vanished. The force of Dickens's image of the happy home is derived largely from its sense of gregariousness, of shared sympathies and shared pleasure. This may be one of the reasons for the failure to make the Boffins' new house seem like a home. It lacks that close physical proximity imposed upon the inhabitants of a working-class home simply by the absence of extra space. Messengers are sent continually to different members of the Boffin household and this intermediary mode of communication inevitably leads to a loss of spontaneity and the kind of quick intuitive understanding shown to exist between Jemima and Polly Toodle. As gentility moves in, life seeps out - Dickens's central artistic and social concern throughout David Copperfield.

The strength which Dickens shows binding his good working-class homes together resides in the loving heart - 'as good



as gold and as true as steel' says Peggotty of her brother Daniel.<sup>8</sup> Always such characters are identified closely in Dickens's mind with the virtues extolled in the New Testament, and especially in the Sermon on the Mount. The simplicity of their natures is seen as a spiritual grace which revolts from any form of deviousness or worldly dealing as from something alien and offensive. This innocence to the ways of the world often leads to a sense of truth denied to more sophisticated characters. The Garlands, in The Old Curiosity Shop, with their greater experience of the world find it impossible not to doubt Kit Nubbles' protestations of innocence, but his mother reposes an absolute faith in her son which sweeps away the apparently damning evidence as so many straws before the wind. With the same strong trust, untainted by rational doubt, Polly Toodle believes in her disreputable son, Rob, Mrs Bagnet stands by George when he is charged with murder, and Rachael in Hard Times protests the innocence of Stephen Blackpool. In all these cases the power conferred by a loving heart leads to a vision of truth beyond the reach of worldly wisdom or even the rational evidence of the physical senses. In thus endowing his good working-class characters Dickens is, of course, part of the central romantic tradition which opposes the intuitive understanding of the child, the unsophisticated, and the artist, to the superficial knowledge of the rest of society whose eyes and minds are clouded by their materialistic

<sup>8</sup> D.C., p. 33.

concern with mere outward appearances and conformity to conventional expectations.

Unfortunately, at times, Dickens's insistence on the simplicity of such characters has a less attractive effect. They become childish rather than childlike, and their response to life inadequate, demeaning of adult intelligence. The first sign of this weakness appears with Mr Bagnet, and thence grows progressively more marked in virtuous working-class characters, especially in the men. There is an abnegation of responsibility in Stephen Blackpool's despairing, "'Tis just a muddle a'together, an the sooner I'm dead, the better'.<sup>9</sup> Doubtless Dickens expects us to admire Stephen's patience under suffering, but his quietism is too negative, too facile an acceptance of defeat. It fails as an adequate response to the problems of Coketown which Dickens has articulated so fully in the novel. Such passivity was due largely to Dickens's cautious conservatism. The last thing he wishes to suggest in his novels is that the working-class should take matters into their own hands, even though all the force of his writing indicates that this is the only hope for them. The quality of unalloyed goodness which he creates in the gregarious working-class families of his middle novels, is very fine indeed, suggesting that virtue might be fun, rather than tediously genteel. However, the strength of the individual loving heart which creates such homes is weakened at times by a negative humility,

<sup>9</sup> H.T., p. 75.

which, far from leading to a vision of truth, turns away from reality into regressive childishness. Such false innocence, like that of the Pinches in Martin Chuzzlewit, is the opposite of simplicity, involving as it does a dishonest avoidance of real life. Heroism of a humble kind must often involve stoical endurance of unavoidable suffering and hardship, but it is never compatible with such escapist sentimentality.

The very first sentence of David Copperfield raises the issue of heroic qualities - 'Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show'.<sup>10</sup> The subsequent narrative appears to answer this query with a confident affirmative. David's life is told as a triumphant progress overcoming all obstacles on his way to fame, success and fortune. Not even Samuel Smiles could produce a more typical nineteenth-century tale of rags to riches by honest endeavour and diligent self-help. For David's upward social path is plotted also as a curve of moral improvement, in which he learns to subdue his youthful impetuosity, acquiring a mature self-discipline through sobering experience of the pain inflicted by his earlier wilfulness.<sup>11</sup> However,

<sup>10</sup> D.C., p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Hardy describes David's moral development as 'a very neat graph of progress'. The Moral Art of Dickens (London, 1970), p. 130.



the question Dickens raises so prominently and deliberately at the outset of the novel reflects the deep disquiet he feels, and is not to be expelled by such an easy and obvious answer. As in Martin Chuzzlewit, there are oppositions within his text itself which challenge and subvert the apparent meaning of the narrative's moral conclusion, and, as in the former novel, this opposition finds focus in the alternative values represented by the main working-class characters.

Although, in *David Copperfield*, Dickens appears at times to be drawing upon the language and ideas of Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode', the novel is really much closer in spirit to Blake's Songs of Innocence and Experience. The respective title pages that Blake designed for the Songs could almost as easily have been designed to illustrate Dickens's novel. The first depicts two children leaning trustfully upon their mother's knee while she reads to them seated in a garden under the fruitful branches of an apple tree. The other shows two children stretched out in attitudes of grief and despair over the rigid bodies of their dead parents. The scene is set inside, and the design shuts them in, heavy and forbidding like monumental sculpture. David's earliest memories are of a world of Blakean innocence, full of trust, beauty and affection, and the values inhering in this world are connected in a fundamental way to the question which opens the novel. This, in fact, echoes a similar initial question placed at the beginning of St. Matthew's

Gospel, Chapter 18, a text which provides the same kind of original inspiration for David Copperfield as the creation myth does for Martin Chuzzlewit. Matthew 18 begins with the disciples asking Christ who will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven and for answer he places a little child in their midst, telling them, 'Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven./ Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven'.<sup>12</sup> The remainder of Chapter 18 foreshadows the main incidents of the novel, warning 'whoso shall offend against one of these little ones ... it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea', and continuing with the story of the good shepherd who goes in search of the lamb which is lost as Daniel Peggotty goes off to find his lost niece, Emily.<sup>13</sup>

Daniel Peggotty is the father figure, who, with his sister, presides over the childhood world of innocence which Dickens depicts in David Copperfield, and the values that this world represents are essentially their values of gentleness, compassion, and inner fortitude. Mrs Gummidge's querulous dependence serves to define Daniel's durability in the same way as the frivolity of David's mother points out the dependability of Peggotty's affectionate care for

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 18. 3-4.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 18. 6.

them both. When his mother's wayward nature threatens David's childhood security and happiness it is inevitable that Peggotty will carry him off to the protection of her brother's ark at Yarmouth. There, David experiences all the warm gregariousness of a working-class home in which feelings and experience are part of a shared style of living. The little boat with its one living-room impels a sense of intimacy and reciprocity, and David, on his first night, is drawn immediately into the close-knit circle around the fire:

Little Emily had overcome her shyness, and was sitting by my side upon the lowest and least of the lockers ... Mrs Peggotty, with the white apron, was knitting on the opposite side of the fire. Peggotty at her needlework was as much at home with St Paul's and the bit of wax candle, as if they had never known any other roof. Ham, who had been giving me my first lesson in all-fours, was trying to recollect a scheme of telling fortunes with the dirty cards ... Mr Peggotty was smoking his pipe. 14

This inclusive security and affection is thenceforward always available to David in times of need, and Daniel's welcoming boat is always there in the background of his life as a potential home for him should he accept its implicit offer. Steerforth, that other fatherless boy in the novel, also has its resources of trust and love made available to him.

Daniel's protective embrace allows David, and Emily as well, a period of timeless, childish tranquillity out of reach of the problems and sorrows of the real world. During this brief spell they are absorbed in a glowing, imaginative

14 D.C., p. 32.



existence of romantic dreams. David believes he falls in love with Emily as he watches a shining sail 'make such a pretty little image ... in her bright eye',<sup>15</sup> and conjures up heroic daydreams of himself delivering her from terrible dangers. Emily's dreams are of the day she will make Daniel a fine gentleman, and she enumerates the gold watch, diamond buttons and velvet waistcoat she will bestow upon him 'as if they were a glorious vision'.<sup>16</sup> The happiness, the freedom to dream and give fanciful licence to the imagination, and the nurturing of a bright response to people and the physical universe allowed to those who inhabit such a world of innocence during early childhood are regarded by Dickens as the most precious inheritance of these short years. This is a theme to which he returns again and again in novels, speeches and journalism, especially stressing the importance of fancy and romance and visions of ideal worlds, as guarantees against future lack of pity, idealism and grace.<sup>17</sup> In David Copperfield the lasting, beneficial influences of

<sup>15</sup> D.C., p. 34.

<sup>16</sup> D.C., p. 35.

<sup>17</sup> In an attack upon George Cruickshank's use of fairy tales as a means of propagating abstinence he writes, with characteristic earnestness, of the 'fairy literature of our childhood': 'It would be hard to estimate the amount of gentleness and mercy that has made its way among us through these slight channels. Forbearance, courtesy, consideration for the poor and aged, kind treatment of animals, the love of nature, abhorrence of tyranny and brute force - many such good things have first been nourished in the child's heart by this powerful aid'. 'Frauds on the Fairies', Household Words, 1 October, 1853, reprinted in Miscellaneous Papers, I, 435.

childhood are firmly stressed at the outset of the novel and unequivocally linked to David's future development into a writer. In Chapter 2 entitled 'I Observe', David interrupts his narrative of events to remark on the wonderful accuracy of children's powers of observation which some people preserve into adult life; those who do, he continues, 'retain a certain freshness, and gentleness, and capacity of being pleased, which are also an inheritance they have preserved from their childhood'.<sup>18</sup> He concludes this obviously significant statement by laying claim himself to such acuteness of observation as a child, and to the retention of strong memories of childhood now that he is a man. Within the convention of the novel, we can say that David certainly makes good these claims. 'Freshness' is precisely the term one would use to describe the sharp-edged, vital quality of the writing in which he relates the early part of his life. The chapters dealing with David's first memories of home with Peggotty and his mother, and the days at Yarmouth depict an ideal world of innocence. Nevertheless, nothing could be further from the stale and escapist pastoralism which surrounds Little Nell at the end of The Old Curiosity Shop, for instance, than the comic vitality and brightly focussed detail which characterize the preliminary pages of David Copperfield.

Despite David's claims, however, the characters who give greatest dramatic reality to Dickens's faith in the benign influences of childhood qualities preserved into adult

<sup>18</sup> D.C., p. 13.



life are undoubtedly the whole Peggotty family. Again the word 'freshness' seems best able to convey the quality of their presentation. There is nothing lifeless or self-denying about their goodness as there is in the virtue of Agnes or Tom Pinch, for example; nor are they grotesque adult-children like the brothers Cheeryble in Nicholas Nickleby. As with the Toodles in Dombey, Dickens employs the constant play of comedy to prevent any slide into sentimentality, and conveys a sense of idiosyncratic individuality with his typically startling accuracy of perceived detail. Peggotty's polishing of the shillings she gives David as he leaves for school, for instance, exactly picks out the quality of her minute loving care and her own fresh insight into a child's delight in whatever is bright and new. Through the Peggottys, Dickens successfully gives form and solidity to the imaginative concept of 'becoming as a little child' and beyond this, he achieves the even more difficult task of making it seem an engaging and desirable end. The quality of the Peggottys' response to the world, their gregarious sympathy with their fellows, and their positive and energetic engagement with life, all so finely articulated by Dickens in the opening chapters of the novel, create an artistic touchstone against which all subsequent claims and developments have to be tested.

Just as Blake's Songs of Innocence contain an occasional dark hint which seems to point towards the Songs of Experience, so the sunlit world of innocence inhabited by David and Emily is threatened at the edges by shadowy fears and vague



misgivings. Emily's 'glorious vision' of making Mr Peggotty a gentleman is also intended to protect him from the menace of the sea which prowls hungrily along the margin of the flat during their walks, like a beast of prey awaiting its time. David has heroic daydreams of rescuing Emily from dragons, but his sleep at nights is troubled by the nightmare of the geese who waddled after him in his infancy with their long necks stretched out 'as a man environed by wild beasts might dream of lions'.<sup>19</sup> The wisps of the deserted rooks' nests which drift down in the wind, point, with prophetic irony, to the destruction of both their happy childhood homes, and the scattering of their dreams like straws.

The world of experience which David abruptly enters on his return from Yarmouth is in every way opposed to that of innocence. In place of love it rules by inflicting fear and shame; instead of gentleness it offers brutality; in place of freshness - death; and it replaces responsiveness to real beauty with a sterile concern for outward appearance. The values of the world of innocence are most truly represented by the gregarious Peggottys, those of the world of experience by the suspicious rigidity of the Murdstones. Mr Murdstone is a Blakean figure of evil - the selfish father of men - and his vengeful, Old Testament religion is ideally suited to his dark, self-willed desire to dominate and control. As David realizes 'it was another name for tyranny; and for

<sup>19</sup> D.C., p. 14.

a certain gloomy, arrogant devil's humour, that was in them both'.<sup>20</sup> Later in the novel Dr Chillip suggests to David that Murdstone 'sets up an image of himself, and calls it the Divine Nature'.<sup>21</sup> This insight by Dickens into the way men reify their own qualities in the person of their deity, left relatively undeveloped here, leads in Bleak House to a complete understanding of the whole reified structure of society. Blake's poem 'A Divine Image', which he felt to be too bitter to include in Songs of Experience, begins 'Cruelty has a Human Heart,/ And Jealousy a Human Face;/ Terror the Human Form Divine,/ And Secrecy the Human Dress.'<sup>22</sup> These four qualities are the dominant traits of Murdstone's character. The psychological insight Dickens brings to his study of Murdstone, and the authenticity with which this is registered, completely obstruct any tendency in the novel to move in the direction of moral fable which might have been caused by the rather black and white nature of the oppositions it describes. By viewing the man almost entirely through the eyes of an estranged and then frightened child Dickens conveys the dark, evil nature of his lust for power with compelling force. In the scene in which Murdstone describes to David how he breaks an obstinate horse one is made conscious of a repulsively sensual quality about his cruelty which feeds upon the repressive obsession with sin in his religious creed.

<sup>20</sup> D.C., p. 49.

<sup>21</sup> D.C., p. 834.

<sup>22</sup> Complete Writings, p. 221.

The first and most direct means of oppression employed in the world of experience is the fear of such physical brutality. Having described how he makes the horse wince and smart, Murdstone takes to supervising David's lessons with an ostentatiously displayed cane. Behind each breathless sentence which describes the child's terrorized and doomed struggle to escape, Dickens keeps us aware of the man's barely controlled desire for the inevitable moment when he can subdue David, like the horse, by the infliction of pain.

All the characters who dominate in the world of experience in the novel partake of Murdstone's sadism. Creakle cuts at the boys as if he needs to satisfy 'a craving appetite', and the true nature of Steerforth is revealed in David's fears of meeting the boy who had cut his name 'deep and often' in the school door.<sup>23</sup> Dickens makes this even plainer in one of those characteristic gestures he employs to convey meaning in a flash of insight. Steerforth asks David contemptuously if Traddles is 'as soft as ever' while he beats to pieces a lump of coal with the poker.<sup>24</sup> Uriah Heep exhibits a similar sadistic impulse as he baits the broken Mr Wickfield at his own dinner table. Shortly before this incident he has told David, 'I am very 'umble to the present moment, Master Copperfield, but I've got a little power'.<sup>25</sup>

Uriah Heep's hold over his employer rests in the threat

<sup>23</sup> D.C., pp. 89-90, 79.

<sup>24</sup> D.C., p. 424.

<sup>25</sup> D.C., p. 575.



of public exposure and shame rather than physical suffering, and this indeed is the second and most powerful weapon used by the world of experience to maintain its oppressive control. Beating does not break David's spirit nearly so successfully as the continual humiliation Murdstone inflicts upon him, especially in depriving him of his mother's former affectionate approval. David begins to believe he really is a bad and stubborn boy who deserves hard treatment. What Dickens is beginning to explore here is the relationship between loss of self-respect in individuals and their social control by authority, and again the understanding gained in this novel is taken much further in terms of its general social significance in Bleak House. David tries to shield his self-respect by identifying with the carefree heroes of his favourite novels - 'The Captain never lost dignity, from having his ears boxed with the Latin Grammar. I did; but the Captain was a Captain and a hero, in despite of all the grammars of all the languages in the world, dead or alive'.<sup>26</sup> In this short passage Dickens sets out what is to be a recurring pattern of reaction for the rest of David's life.

At Creakle's school he finds a real-life captain and hero in Steerforth, but his identifying adulation is misplaced. The public humiliation and shaming of Mr Mell again reveals Steerforth's kinship with Murdstone in their common desire to dominate and suppress others. The incident with Mr Mell

<sup>26</sup> D.C., p. 56.

gives David his first experience of the way gentility is used as a means of inflicting shame. In the real world beyond innocence, outward form is taken as an indication of real worth and Mr Mell is humiliated on account of his shabby, ungentlemanly appearance and his impoverished mother. As a child David instinctively sees through Mr Murdstone's glossy surface to the real man within, and Dickens indicates his loss of innocence by his different reaction to the social confrontation between Steerforth and the teacher. 'I could not help thinking even in that interval, I remember, what a noble fellow he was in appearance, and how homely and plain Mr Mell looked opposed to him'.<sup>27</sup> In a novel in which the highest values are centred upon the loving home that epithet 'homely' is not being used casually by Dickens. David, however, allows any doubts he may have to be soothed by Steerforth's insinuation that Mr Mell's sensitivity is not a great deal finer than his appearance - 'His feelings will soon get the better of it, I'll be bound. His feelings are not like yours, Miss Traddles'.<sup>28</sup>

Artfully placed immediately after this incident is the visit to the school by Peggotty and Ham. The passage describing this is a fine illustration of Dickens's ability to suggest, with superb restraint and tact, the subtlest movement of thought or the ebb and flow of feeling which is barely, if at all, conscious. The visit marks David's

<sup>27</sup> D.C., p. 98.

<sup>28</sup> D.C., p. 100.

moment of choice, when he shifts his allegiance from the working-class world of the Peggottys to the genteel world represented by Steerforth. Dickens does not blunt his effect here by any direct statement, all the meaning necessary is conveyed by the delicate, shifting intonation of David's dialogue with the fishermen before and then after Steerforth enters the room. It is supremely well done and understood so thoroughly that one is tempted to suggest that David here enacts a choice that Dickens knew from the inside.<sup>29</sup> What David learns from the experience of Mr Mell is that identification with Steerforth affords not only protection from physical bullying, but from the infliction of social shame as well. Indeed, all the boys at the school appreciate that Steerforth's aristocratic manner intimidates even Mr Creakle. Throughout the novel Dickens points out the way the world of experience judges falsely from outward appearances. Not only David's mother, but his aunt and Traddles' sister-in-law, the Beauty from Somerset, are betrayed into unhappy marriages by falling for glamorous appearances. Emily's case is yet more disastrous. Mr Spenlow fools the whole business world and society, while he lives, by keeping up a show of prosperity. In such a world, judgement will obviously fall most harshly on those who cannot compete, the poor and the defective.

29 Steven Marcus makes a similar conjecture about Dickens's ambivalent feelings towards Bob Fagin, the boy who befriended him during his lonely days in the blacking warehouse - 'a companionship or affection which is at once needed and intolerable'. Pickwick to Dombey, pp. 364-369.



It is in vain that Miss Mowcher, the dwarf, pleads, 'Try not to associate bodily defects with mental'.<sup>30</sup> The method of most people is well illustrated by Steerforth when he casually tells Rosa Dartle of working-class people: 'They are not to be expected to be as sensitive as we are. Their delicacy is not to be shocked, or hurt very easily. They are wonderfully virtuous, I dare say ... But they have not very fine natures, and they may be thankful that, like their coarse rough skins, they are not easily wounded'.<sup>31</sup> So insidious is this pressure for confusing the outside with the inside that when David arrives at Dover he feels 'quite wicked in my dirt and dust, with my tangled hair'.<sup>32</sup> What Dickens is beginning to suggest in this novel is that these kind of stereotyped ideas of gentility can become much more effective weapons than Creakle's or Murdstone's canes in perpetuating control and power. 'Mind-forg'd manacles' are stronger than physical chains. If men can be taught that their appearance renders them contemptible and wicked there is no need to whip them into submission.

The character of Ham is used by Dickens as a perfect illustration of the way this process works. Compared to Daniel, his adoptive father, Ham is a much less confident figure. The difference in self-reliance between generations noted in Sam and Tony Weller has been reversed in this novel

<sup>30</sup> D.C., p. 464.

<sup>31</sup> D.C., p. 294.

<sup>32</sup> D.C., p. 182.

in a pessimistic direction. Ham is one of the first characters in Dickens's fiction to illustrate the sense of personal inadequacy imposed by class attitudes. Daniel Peggotty's characteristic gesture of rubbing his hands on his legs 'in comfortable satisfaction', revealing as it does a sense of ease with one's self could never belong to Ham.<sup>33</sup> He has none of his uncle's warm self-delight. Rather than enjoying the sense of his own personality, as do the Wellers and Daniel and the urchin types in Dickens's fiction, Ham finds pleasure in praising others. Although the eagerness with which he greets compliments to Emily or Daniel is a sign of his generous nature, it betrays too a touching lack of self-esteem.<sup>34</sup> Ham is proud of his uncle, but ashamed of himself. This lack of confidence in his own inherent worth expresses itself in an awkward self-conscious manner which renders him bashful, simpering and inarticulate, and makes him carry his manly strength with a round-shouldered diffidence and lack of ease. The contrast between him and Steerforth, two fatherless sons, is as stark as that between the two opposed father figures in the novel, and Dickens fully intends this to be so. Steerforth has all the grace of speech, manner and gesture which Ham lacks, but his noble outward appearance covers a heartless vacuum, while the man he dismisses as a 'lout' has a noble heart, full of generous love for others.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> D.C., p. 450.

<sup>34</sup> Esther Summerson, in Bleak House, provides an even more extreme case-study of this need to compensate for a perceived inadequacy of self through constant praise of the virtue of everyone else.

<sup>35</sup> D.C., p. 322.

In these two figures Dickens gives dramatic form to the contest he saw taking place in his own society, and perhaps his own life, between gentility, with its identification of moral worth with appearance, and innate human value; significantly, he lets gentility win. Within the terms of the novel the triumph of Steerforth is a complex issue, but it is certainly to be seen as due in part to the fact that Ham, in his own mind, also thinks of himself as a 'lout'. His uncouth, low-status appearance has trapped him in a class stereotype to which even he subscribes. For all those like him there is no escape from contempt or amused scorn. The name Dickens gives him refers to the curse Noah puts upon his son of that name - 'a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren'.<sup>36</sup>

This is the curse also inflicted upon David by Murdstone in his final and most brutal attempt to humiliate and destroy him. David is deprived of education - the single most essential quality for gentility in Victorian England - and sent, at the age of ten, to become 'a little labouring hind' in a warehouse. Dickens's documentation of the desolating sense of personal degradation and shame this experience evokes is well known in relation to his own life, but it is also perfectly integrated into its fictional context. Having been flattered by the regard of the aristocratic Steerforth, having seen Mr Mell disgraced by poverty, and having been told by Murdstone that in staying by Peggotty in the kitchen

<sup>36</sup> Genesis 9. 24-27.



he was keeping 'low and common company', David's secret agony of soul as he sinks into the company of manual workers is not to be wondered at.<sup>37</sup> Even the idealistic dreams of heroism and beauty inherited from the childhood world of innocence become sources of misery instead of inspiration. Realistically, David appreciates that in the world of physical labour all fine aspirations are likely to be crushed and useless - that 'day by day what I had learned, and thought, and delighted in, and raised my fancy and emulation up by, would pass away from me, little by little, never to be brought back any more'.<sup>38</sup> From this position of complete powerlessness and shame David can see no possibility of escape from the world of experience, and in this his condition resembles that of all the labouring class he had joined.

David's first exposure to the world of experience reveals it as a Hobbesian universe of arbitrary power and brutality, and his response is a suitably feudal one of submitting and placing himself under the most powerful protector he can find. A similar device is employed by many of the women in the novel who avoid the fears and struggles of the real world by espousing a posture of innocent timidity. David's mother, Dora and Emily all seek to turn away wrath and adult responsibility by pleading their childish natures. The result of such a regressive refusal to grow up is made

37

D.C., p. 119.

38

D.C., p. 155.

clear by Miss Mowcher: 'They make a plaything of me, use me for their amusement, throw me away when they are tired, and wonder that I feel more than a toy horse or wooden soldier'.<sup>39</sup> So exactly is Emily used and left by Steerforth.

David's further experience of social shame and humiliation belongs much more to the nineteenth century than a feudal world, and his response to it is a typically modern one. He seeks escape through education and gentility. The social and historical analogy behind David's personal experiences is fully developed by Dickens. Just as the middle class aligned itself with the aristocracy rather than with the working class in the Reform Bill of 1832 in order to participate in power, so does David align himself with Steerforth rather than with his old friends the Peggottys. As the middle class continued throughout the century to use their association with the aristocracy to assert their own gentility in the manner that Dickens mocks in his article 'A Toady Tree',<sup>40</sup> or depicts ironically in the figure of Mr Meagles, so too David discovers that aristocratic patronage can lift him above embarrassing social inadequacy. When he returns to London from Dover as a newly educated young gentleman his shaky attempts at asserting this gentility are deflated by unimpressed social inferiors like waiters and coachmen. This kind of class humiliation, illustrating the secret fears of the nouveaux riches that their servants

<sup>39</sup> D.C., p. 461.

<sup>40</sup> 'The Toady Tree', Household Words, 26 May, 1855, reprinted in Miscellaneous Papers, II, 49.

could see through their social pretensions, was a favourite subject for cartoons in *Punch* at the same period as Dickens was writing, but David is rescued by the timely arrival of his old hero, Steerforth. With a negligent wave of his enchanted aristocratic arm waiters suddenly become deferential, the best rooms are available and the impending threat of social disgrace vanishes.

Before he is rescued by Steerforth, however, David has made his own imaginative escape by entering the heroic world of Julius Caesar at a theatre, returning only very reluctantly from this 'glorious vision' of a more ideal reality to what seems a 'bawling, splashing ... muddy miserable world'.<sup>41</sup> After his early traumatic experience of the real world this desire for escape becomes the dominant tendency in David's life, and the question that Dickens is raising implicitly in the novel is whether the escape is a heroic fulfilment of those early noble aspirations after the ideal, nurtured in the world of innocence, or whether it is a fearful flight from a reality which has proved to be too harsh to bear. The implications of this question to Dickens's own life as well as to David's, and also to the social desire for increased gentility among the middle class generally, does not need to be stressed. All the ambiguity of Dickens's feelings about the related but ultimately opposing impulses of flight and aspiration are finely caught in the image of Mr Dick's kite.

<sup>41</sup> D.C., p. 286.



The beauty and poignant grace of its flight stir the imagination, but Mr Dick's recovery of an adult mind depends upon him grappling with things on earth - with reality:

It was quite an affecting sight, I used to think, to see him with the kite when it was up a great height in the air ... He never looked so serene as he did then. I used to fancy, as I sat by him of an evening, on a green slope, and saw him watch the kite high in the quiet air, that it lifted his mind out of its confusion and bore it ... into the skies. As he wound the string in, and it came lower and lower down out of the beautiful light, until it fluttered to the ground, and lay there like a dead thing, he seemed to wake gradually out of a dream; and I remember to have seen him take it up, and look about him in a lost way, as if they had both come down together, so that I pitied him with my 42 heart.

David's own first flight from confusion is from the friendless London streets and the blacking warehouse to the safety of his aunt's at Dover. It is a nightmare journey in which terrible figures from the roughest dregs of the working class stretch out, like the geese of his earlier dreams, to claw him back into their world of fear, humiliation and violence. Even here, Dickens has a social analogy in mind, describing the journey in imagery which recalls the Israelites' escape from Egyptian slavery to the promised land - symbolism frequently invoked by radical preachers during the nineteenth century to suggest working-class emancipation. However, it is with David's emancipation from shame and toil that the real problems of the novel begin. The flight of Little Nell from London turns out to be an escape towards the negative freedom of death, and it is possible in many ways to read David Copperfield as a much finer version of

The Old Curiosity Shop with some of the same problems and with the same drift towards death. David's flight turns out to be not so much one of aspiration as a retreat from life. Despite the energy which characterizes all that is best in Dickens's art there is always present in his fiction this contrary impulse towards quietism and death.

At Dover, David becomes 'a new boy', but what he enters upon, swaddled up regressively like a baby, is not the lost world of innocence he had known as a child, but the false innocence of a childish gentility, which Dickens was later to depict more clearly through the infantile regimes of Mrs General in Little Dorrit and the young person of Podsnappery in Our Mutual Friend. Dr Strong is the father-figure of this world, but, despite the praise lavished upon him and his school, his essential quality is defined when David says that the master reminds him of a 'blind old horse' that used to 'tumble over the graves at Blunderstone'.<sup>43</sup> In fact, imagery connected with death becomes commonplace in the novel from this point on, and the whole school experience can be summed up in David's memories of Sunday morning service in the Cathedral - 'the earthy smell, the sunless air, the sensation of the world being shut out'.<sup>44</sup> The nightmare figures who prowl around the edges of this world of genteel innocence, like the wild animals of the earlier one, are the sturdy beggars, (who have to be chased away before they

<sup>43</sup> D.C., p. 226.

<sup>44</sup> D.C., p. 265.



can impose upon the unworldly Doctor), and an aggressive butcher's boy, who is eventually knocked back into his proper place, minus two teeth, by David, captain and hero of the school.

After such a regressive beginning his subsequent career as proctor (chosen only when Steerforth describes it as genteel and carried on in a lazy nook near St Paul's Cathedral), and the grave, dull tone in which he invokes his literary activities should come as no surprise. Angus Wilson is surely right when he complains that Dickens diminishes the novelist's art by making it 'so much a matter of moral duty'.<sup>45</sup> David Copperfield, one cannot help feeling, is exactly the kind of writer who would create a Tom Pinch, a little Nell, or an Agnes, but never in a hundred years rise to a Sam Weller or a Sairey Gamp, or play with language with the comic and poetic vitality of a Charles Dickens. If one compares the child's fresh response to people and things - the constant seeing the world as a new, exciting, beautiful place - made real in the early part of the novel, one can only feel what a stale and conventional vision has come to take its place in the grown man.

Turning from David's public career to his personal and moral development, the same kind of loss underneath the seeming progress is apparent. The depiction of the adult-child relationship between Peggotty and David achieves some

<sup>45</sup> The World of Charles Dickens (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1972), p. 216.



of the finest effects of all Dickens's writing about childhood. Like Polly Toodle, goodness in Peggotty is shown as an active, practical force full of comic humanity. After the scene in which she alone reaches out a defiant sympathy for David in his state of complete isolation, whispering affectionately and kissing him through the locked bedroom door, her moral and artistic right to be regarded as his only real mother would seem to be unassailable. However, in the world of experience love counts for nothing compared to cash and respectable status, and Betsey Trotwood, not Peggotty, can provide these. Thus Peggotty's claims within the novel are pushed aside and a threadbare respectability is scraped over the old relationship with the pitifully inadequate title 'my old nurse'.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, once David has been reborn into gentility Peggotty's presence becomes something of an embarrassment, and Dickens, rather like David, does not seem to know what to do with her. Like Mr Murdstone he forces her back into her proper place, dusting David's rooms in London, waiting upon his aunt, and watching his wedding, not among friends and family, but from the gallery, at a distance suitable for servants. In the latter part of the novel Peggotty is almost squeezed out of the story altogether. She has no longer any role or function within it, but prowls on the margin of the narrative like a displaced and reproachful ghost.

The transition from Dora to Agnes marks the completion

<sup>46</sup> David first uses this decidedly upper-middle-class term for Peggotty when he introduces Ham and Daniel to Steerforth at Salem House. D.C., p. 104.

of David's journey from 'freshness and gentleness, and capacity of being pleased' to the dead, stale world of gentility. Dora belongs to the world of sunshine and innocence - a child of joy - and David's sulky disapproval of her is reminiscent of Murdstone's gloomy antipathy to all that is free and gentle. Miss Murdstone's suspicious supervision of her servants is made fun of, but the whole, harsh, judgement of Dora centres upon just this genteel failing - the fear of insubordinate lower orders again. The depiction of Agnes brings the atmosphere of The Old Curiosity Shop much closer to David Copperfield. With her saintly calm, she represents not the world of innocence, but the escape of death. Poor Agnes has never been a real child; when David first sees her she already carries the keys of responsibility and duty - 'She looked as staid and discreet a housekeeper as the old house could have'.<sup>47</sup> In contrast to the world of innocence which Dickens depicts always in terms of sunshine and flowering gardens, Agnes is associated with stained glass windows in a church and with the moon, which in turn is consistently linked with death in the novel. The day on which David and Agnes admit their mutual love is 'a cold, harsh winter day':

We walked that winter evening in the fields together; and the blessed calm within us seemed to be partaken by the frosty air. The early stars began to shine while we were lingering on, and looking up to them, we thanked our God for having guided us to this tranquillity.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup> D.C., p. 223.

<sup>48</sup> D.C., p. 863.



There has never been a more chilling and joyless consummation. It is an image of frozen sterility, lacking even the colour of life. The gregarious warmth which David experiences as a child around the Peggotty hearth is completely extinguished in this sedate union of experience, and although David writes of his children, it is really impossible to imagine any new life or youthful freshness coming from such a marriage. The novel which opens with a question about the possibility of living heroically ends by embracing an image of death.

This incompatibility between narrative and imaginative meanings of David Copperfield suggests that Dickens is using the novel to explore an uneasiness which was beginning to press up beneath the surface of his apparently successful artistic and social life. The early years of conquest were behind him and the ease of assured fame and fortune appeared to stretch ahead, but already profound doubts about the nature of the triumphant victory he had won were undermining his sense of fulfilment. Dickens had begun to fear that the long-desired promised land of genteel aspiration was not the kingdom of heaven after all, and that its innocence, far from being a childlike acceptance of life, entailed a childish refusal to look at reality. It was, moreover, a cold and sterile world in which warm human relationships were chilled by formality, by a repressive moral code, and by a wilful desire to exercise personal power, while the fresh responsive artist's appreciation of the world around him was dulled by conformity, stereotyped assumptions and concern for outward



appearance only. From his own experiences and observations of working-class life about the London streets, and perhaps from his nostalgic childhood memories of Mary Weller, Dickens felt that escape from this enclosing prison of gentility which was gripping English middle-class society ever more firmly, could lie only in the direction of the working class. There, he believed, the qualities represented by the Peggottys of affectionate reciprocation of feelings, spontaneity and vitality still existed, and these were qualities which as an artist he could not afford to lose. However, in opposition to these imaginative and emotional needs was the dread, created by his early years in the blacking factory, of being associated with that class, and his ever-present fear of social failure. Like David, Dickens for many years must have expected every waiter to call his bluff. Apart from this, the early experience had also taught him the futility of noble dreams and aspirations towards ideals in a life of low labour. It is to his credit that he never allows his own success to distort the problem into a facile Smilesian optimism.<sup>49</sup> He knew only too well how fortuitous his own escape had been. For the vast numbers of the working class who made up that world no such release was to be expected. Yet it remained one of his firmest-held

<sup>49</sup> His own realistic awareness of society's actual attitude to social ambition among the lower orders, as opposed to its pious platitudes, is recorded in Minnie Omer's resentment of Emily's aspirations - 'Then she should have kept to her own station in life, father', and in Uriah Heep's insistence that humbleness 'goes down best'. D.C., pp. 305, 575.

beliefs that without idealizing fancies and noble aspiration, life degenerates into a merely Hobbesian existence - brutish and nasty. From this point on, his fiction reveals a continual search for some kind of freedom which would allow the working class to fulfil its dreams and heroic ideals despite the physical constraints of a harsh life, and for a form of aspiration which would not merely repeat David Copperfield's (and genteel society's) flight from reality.

In this novel one possible solution to the dilemma is explored through the characters of Ham and Daniel Peggotty. Not only have they retained the childhood inheritance of delight in the world, they have also nourished their imaginations with dreams of beauty and grace. For them both, their desire for the ideal has come to centre upon the bewitching figure of Little Emily. Mr Omer, the undertaker, tells David, 'she has made a home out of that old boat, sir, that stone and marble couldn't beat', and Ham describes how he has watched her grow up 'like a flower'.<sup>50</sup> When the world of experience shatters this dream of perfection, there is no retreat in their response, no longing for death, or escape into childish regrets for what has been lost. The impulse is towards action and a striving to overcome the evil. Despite the overwhelming nature of the tragedy, and the physical destruction of the boat-house, this home does not break up like the other homes in the novel at the onset of trouble, or like the other wreck in which Steerforth is

<sup>50</sup> D.C., pp. 440, 315.

involved. Its qualities of endurance reside in the inhabitants' hearts. It must have seemed a marvellously confirming touch to Dickens when he discovered that the local dialect word for home was 'a being'. After the first shock has passed both Ham and Mr Peggotty are guided by an intuitive sense of what must be done. Experience does not bring cynicism in its wake, but a deeper trust in the sense of inner truth which they have preserved unclouded by any deference to the world of appearances. After the loss of Emily both men constantly acknowledge David's superior education and learning, but before their instinctive understanding he is shown to be as helpless and humble as a clumsy boy.

In Daniel Peggotty this strong sense of truth forms itself into an all-embracing purpose which thenceforth becomes the single passion and meaning of his life - to find and bring home his niece. Q.D. Leavis has written of this love for Emily as 'morbid' - 'a horribly possessive love that is expressed characteristically in heat, violence and fantasies, impressing us as maniacal'.<sup>51</sup> This judgement violates every feeling we have about the Peggottys in the novel, but she is right in sensing the power and intensity of Daniel's love for Emily. It is an intensity of protective instinct reaching down into violent emotions and reactions which few parents would care to deny. The passionate strength of Mr Peggotty's need to find and save his niece adds a new

<sup>51</sup> F.R. Leavis and Q.D. Leavis, Dickens the Novelist, third edition (London, 1973), p. 79.



dimension of human profundity to the biblical myth of the good shepherd, and it changes too our perception of Mr Peggotty's role within the novel. The relentless drive of his affection gives such impressive force to the characterization that it is lifted on to a heroic, mythic plane. Much of the old, humorous individuality is lost once he sets out upon his journey through the world, but he becomes instead a symbolic figure of impersonal heroic dimensions. By strictly realistic criteria Daniel's pilgrimage through Europe may be questionable, but it is perfectly in accord with the symbolic landscape of the novel and its recurring imagery of roads and journeying. Indeed, Dickens uses just this imagery to suggest the essential nature of the three types of heroic progress he dramatizes in the novel. Steerforth's callous Napoleonic ruthlessness rings out clearly in his voice just before he betrays Emily and her home. 'We mustn't be scared by the common lot' he tells David. '...Ride on over all obstacles and win the race!'<sup>52</sup> David, by contrast, tells Dora that although their present path is 'stony and rugged', it 'rests with us to smooth it', and thus will he always attempt to avoid the rough and vulgar in life.<sup>53</sup> Only Daniel Peggotty's pilgrimage is heroically altruistic. Like the Good Shepherd he sets out to bring back what has been lost without thought of the obstacles in his way, his own privations, or the comfort and security he leaves behind.

<sup>52</sup> D.C., p. 426.

<sup>53</sup> D.C., p. 541.

Ham's is the most unspectacular but perhaps the most difficult form of heroism - the stoical acceptance of pain and loss. However, Dickens does provide him with one final moment of supreme action. In the storm he becomes, at last, chief actor in the drama, completely dwarfing David, the gentleman and scholar, with his physical authority. With fine artistic tact Dickens never allows us to know exactly what is in Ham's mind in regard to Steerforth. He sets out into the storm only to save a fellow-creature, unaware, as far as we know, that he gives his life for his social enemy. It is a starkly heroic act, untainted by any false sentimentality - greater love hath no man than this.

Forster believed that the Peggottys were Dickens's favourite characters in the novel, and it seems likely that he did intend them to be recognized as the only true heroes in the story.<sup>54</sup> The difficulty comes in relating their particular kind of altruistic greatness to the real world, and this problem resides, like all the problems of the novel, in its tendency to retreat from life. Although the opposition between the false virtue of appearance as against real inner worth is clearly set up in the contrasting figures of Ham and Steerforth, and although Dickens carefully warns readers of Steerforth's real nature, he yet blurs the issue at the end. In Barnaby Rudge the servant Miggs becomes a safe depository for the hostility which most properly belonged to Mrs Varden, and similarly in David Copperfield the hatred and contempt

<sup>54</sup> Forster, II, 107.

due to Steerforth are deflected upon his servant. While Steerforth escapes almost uncensured in the text, Littimer is spoken of as 'some unclean beast'.<sup>55</sup> Within the terms of the novel, Dora's values are more unmistakably rejected than Steerforth's, and it is his death rather than hers which is registered with a sense of permanent loss. It seems that while Dickens earnestly means well by Ham and is fully aware of his hidden spiritual nobility, his authorial imagination, like David's and Emily's, and most of his middle-class contemporaries, soars up to Steerforth. The romantic dream of aristocratic beauty casts a spell which Dickens cannot finally bring down to muddy earth.

Moreover, Littimer is not the only reprehensible working-class character in the novel. Indeed, with the exceptions of the Peggottys all the working-class figures seem to belong to the terror of David's early experience of the world beyond innocence - cunning, dishonest, rapacious and cruel. Waiters cheat and torment him, coachmen snub him, a boy with a donkey steals his money, and tinkers threaten his life. Even as a married man, his servants cheat and steal and indulge in moral blackmail. Thus the Peggottys exist in a social vacuum, shut off in pastoral isolation from the rest of the novel. We see Sam Weller and Mrs Gamp within the context of a particularized, cultural environment which gives meaning and focus to their roles within the novels. We do not even see Daniel Peggotty enjoying a pint at the Willing Mind.

<sup>55</sup> D.C., p. 667.



Inevitably, this lack of integration into the total world of the novel weakens the reality and scope of Dickens's exploration of social aspiration, idealism and human greatness within a class society. The Peggottys are shut into a pastoral world of innocence until they are shipped off to the Eden of Australia with Dickens's other social problems - the Micawbers, and the young page-boy who became too emotionally attached to David and Dora.

In Martin Chuzzlewit, the working-class characters, particularly Sairey Gamp, can be seen as challenging the overt meaning of the moral narrative. In David Copperfield the Peggottys assert a similarly subversive influence, by which means Dickens explores, not only the pressing worries he was beginning to experience in his own life and art, but also the identical problems underlying the apparently triumphant material progress of the nation. This, he feared increasingly, was leading, not to a promised land of prosperity, but to a blighting of all human responsiveness and creativity. However, the pastoral isolation imposed on the Peggottys obstructs the possibility of achieving a really fruitful dialectical opposition of contrary forces within the novel. The Peggottys never function actively in a real world like Sairey Gamp and Young Bailey, for in David Copperfield the streets have become places of terror and humiliation. Energy, also, whether in people or the elements is a source of fear, never conveyed positively as in Martin Chuzzlewit, but always as anarchic and destructive.

Despite the critical exposure of the dangers of a regressive retreat into false innocence, there runs through the whole novel a deeply-felt impulse towards escape from unwelcome experience into some quiet nook of dreamy tranquillity and ordered calm. The cause of this desire is to be found in the real world which Dickens was experiencing at the time of writing.

David Copperfield was finished in 1849. The previous year had seen revolution break out all over Europe, and London itself in a state of terror as the Chartists took to the streets to present their third petition in an atmosphere charged with fears of destructive violence, anarchy and insurrection. To his credit, Dickens rises above most of these fears, personal and public, showing through his novel that brutality and oppression are the weapons, not of the working class, but of those who control the world of experience. The values which he places in opposition to this world are firmly rooted in working-class culture and are articulated by him with compelling force in the first part of the novel. However, around the edges of this hopeful world of ideal innocence stalk the other working-class figures of the novel - those nightmare bogies of the genteel mind - uncouth, hostile and violent. 'Thus might a man environed by wild beasts dream of lions'.

## CHAPTER 6

Bleak House - The Winnowing Broom

After the humiliating débâcle of the Chartists' final petition, fear of imminent revolution died away in Britain, and, with the passing of the dangerous and turbulent decade of the Hungry Forties, a new mood of optimism began to prevail. At home, a general increase in prosperity seemed possible at last, and internationally Britain ruled not only the waves but a large part of all the land as well. The Great Exhibition of 1852 seemed, to most Englishmen, to put the seal upon a new, confident era of national greatness. Looking back to that time in Portrait of an Age, G.M. Young writes, 'Of all the decades in our history, a wise man would choose the eighteen-fifties to be young in'.<sup>1</sup> Dickens was only thirty-eight and at the height of his own success, but he was far from being swept along by the general self-congratulatory national mood. He starts the decade with Jo the crossing-sweeper, whose youth consists in the fact that he 'has not yet died'.<sup>2</sup> Jo has been associated too often and too carelessly with other child victims in Dickens's novels like *Little Nell* and *Paul Dombey*, one critic even adding the fatal diminutive 'little Jo' as if to rectify an unintended omission on the part of the author.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Victorian England: Portrait of an Age, second edition (London: Oxford University Press paperback, 1960), p. 77.

<sup>2</sup> B.H., p. 219.

<sup>3</sup> Morton Dauwen Zabel, 'Bleak House' in The Dickens Critics, p. 340.



However, Dickens does not regard Jo as 'little' in the same rather ardent and possessive way he thinks of Nell and those like her in his fiction. They are suffering middle-class children and could be his own - could even be himself, while Jo is something very different. To use his own words, he is 'a reg'lar one'.<sup>4</sup>

What this means, not too surprisingly, is that he is rather like the young crossing-sweepers interviewed by Mayhew, and, despite the complaints of modern readers about his idealization, not noticeably more virtuous than they. An old woman letting out a room to a group of such boys told Mayhew that they were good boys and very honest, 'for ... they pays me rig'lor ivery night which is threepence'.<sup>5</sup> Jo's kindness to the brickmakers' wives, his grateful deference to Mr Snagsby, and his general conciliatory attitude to anyone above him would not set him apart upon the pages of London Labour. Meek characters like Jo are just as common as those full of the impudent rebellion of the street urchin. His nickname, Toughy, is much more likely, in that world, to be applied ironically than literally. The lack of promiscuity in his life would certainly be imposed by Dickens in any case, but again is not so unlikely as may be supposed. The crossing-sweepers' landlady told Mayhew that of her boys there was only one youth whose morals were doubtful, 'for he kept late hours,

<sup>4</sup> B.H., p. 223.

<sup>5</sup> Mayhew, II, 505.

and sometimes came home without a penny in his pocket'.<sup>6</sup> It is part of a modern form of sentimentality to demand that every individual brought up, like Jo, in appalling social conditions must be dishonest, rebellious and sexually promiscuous. Like Skimpole, we demand a little more glamour and poetry in the underprivileged than they can always manage. Jo is undernourished, overworked, cold and miserable for most of his life. Not surprisingly, he lacks the energy and spirit to fight very hard. When he is threatened, coerced, or otherwise badly treated, his typical reaction is a grumbling, half-sullen, half-whining submission. This, given his physical condition and inability to understand most of what is going on should not be unconvincing. Typically, when he is brought into the warmth and comfort of Mrs Snagsby's parlour, he nods into a debilitated sleep almost instantly. The whole point that Dickens wishes to make about Jo is that while he is willing to work and to be fairly honest and kind, he simply cannot survive by these very humdrum qualities in the harsh world he inhabits. Jo's talents are of such a dull and ordinary kind that he attracts attention from neither authority, nor missionary, nor church, and so he is left to die. The more energetic and resourceful crossing-sweepers that Mayhew met supplemented their starvation earnings on the crossings by tumbling for the entertainment of theatre audiences. In this they certainly part company from Jo, who only tumbles against

<sup>6</sup> Mayhew, II, 505.

life. The vitality and resilience of the street urchin does not sustain him; although far from being a Paul Dombey, Jo is, nevertheless, a victim.

It makes more sense to associate him with another group of characters within the novels who find themselves at odds with society from the moment they become conscious of their own existences - such characters as Hugh in Barnaby Rudge, Alice Marwood in Dombey and Son, Magwitch in Great Expectations and Gaffer Hexham in Our Mutual Friend; also, perhaps, the brickmakers in Bleak House for although they do not die like all the rest, they are presented in very similar terms. Such types show the other, pessimistic outcome of street life to that of the successful urchins like Sam Weller and Bailey, and it is part of Dickens's realism that he shows both possibilities. There is yet another group of social victims in Dickens's novels who have suffered so badly that they are permanently disabled by their experiences. Typical of these is Guster in Bleak House, Maggy in Little Dorrit and Sloppy in Our Mutual Friend. Invariably, Dickens shows such pitiful characters as wholly good and cheerful, but he refrains from wringing the last drop of pathos from their situation by avoiding any painful death-bed scenes. In some ways, Jo bridges the gap between these two types of social victims in the novels, but he belongs most fully to the former, more realistically conceived characters. Although these are adult in the novels, they have all, like Jo, suffered a neglected childhood,



pushed around by an uncaring, often hostile society. Hugh's earliest memory is of watching, as a boy of six, his mother hanged at Tyburn before a huge gathering, and in all the crowd the only pity shown is that of himself and his dog. After this, like young Abel Magwitch in the later novel, he might have died in a ditch for all the care shown by a professedly Christian society. Alice Marwood's childhood offered little that was better and included an extra potential for future misery:

The only care she knew ... was to be beaten, and stinted, and abused sometimes; and she might have done better without that. She lived in homes like this, and in the streets, with a crowd of little wretches like herself; and yet she brought good looks out of this childhood. So much the worse for her. 7

Neither Gaffer's nor the brickmakers' childhoods are detailed but we may guess their nature from the men's unthinking brutality in their own homes. The shuffling refusal of society to take responsibility for such outcasts is seized upon by Dickens in the phrase which sums up Jo's life - 'moving on'. Like Cain, but without his guilt, they are wanderers on the face of the earth, having no place that they can truly call home.<sup>8</sup>

Also like Jo', most of these characters have but an uncertain sense of their own identities, not knowing their parents, whence they came into the world, their age, or even

<sup>7</sup> D.S., p. 488.

<sup>8</sup> Dickens describes himself in the days of his early impoverished street wandering as 'a young Cain'; even if he does not identify with these victims of the streets as he does with urchins, he undoubtedly feels a close and personal sympathy for their privations and sense of abandonment. Forster, I, 23.

a proper name. Hugh cannot tell Mr Chester how old he is or whether he has any other name. It is part of the bitter irony of Hugh's life that the man who asks is his father. Jo, as usual, sums up their common predicament 'Don't know that everybody has two names. Never heerd of sich a think ... No father, no mother, no friends. Never been to school. What's home?'<sup>9</sup> However, such knowledge of themselves as they do possess is encyclopaedic in comparison to their lack of awareness about the rest of society, from which they are shut out by its suspicion, but even more by their own ignorance and illiteracy. Of all these social victims only Alice Marwood is able to read and write. In considering Jo, Dickens elaborates most clearly the isolating effect of such a condition:

It must be a strange state to be like Jo! To shuffle through the streets, unfamiliar with the shapes, and in utter darkness as to the meaning, of those mysterious symbols, so abundant over the shops, and the corner of streets, and on the doors, and in the windows! To see people read, and to see people write, and to see the postman deliver letters, and not to have the least idea of all that language - to be, to every scrap of it, stone blind and dumb! 10

Compared with Jo and his like, Caddy Jellyby's baby has rich and loving contact with its world.

To such alienated creatures, moments of self-awareness bring, with a sudden force of insight, a sense of their outcast position in relation to the rest of humanity. With striking frequency Dickens organizes such moments when the

<sup>9</sup> B.H., p. 148.

<sup>10</sup> B.H., p. 220.



character finds himself face to face with society and its different and indifferent values before a court of law. He does not utilize these moments of understanding to advocate repentance or even reconciliation, but as an opportunity to turn defendants into eloquent witnesses for the prosecution, arraigning society for its crimes of omission and commission against its weakest members. Thus, when an Ordinary attempts to reprove him for his indecent mirth as he awaits execution Hugh strikes home the truth, 'Can I do better than bear it easily? You bear it easily enough'.<sup>11</sup> His sorrow and compassion for Barnaby Rudge awaiting a like end make a pointed contrast to the inhumanity of the Court, and this unjust sentence of an idiot is the final bitter lesson the world offers Hugh. Alice Marwood, remembering the court which sentenced her to transportation when little more than a child, finds it equally instructive of the way society is ordered:

'And lord, how the gentlemen in the Court talked about it! and how grave the judge was on her duty ... and how he preached about the strong arm of the Law - so very strong to save her when she was an innocent and helpless little wretch; and how solemn and religious it all was. I have thought of that, many times since, <sup>12</sup> to be sure!'

This propensity of society to displace its guilt on to the heads of social outcasts and 'young Cains' becomes more apparent still at the trial of Abel Magwitch. There, for the first time, Magwitch is struck by the alienating effect

<sup>11</sup> B.R., p. 592.

<sup>12</sup> D.S., p. 488.



his own rough appearance has upon the respectable, and he notices how Compeyson's gentlemanly manner disposes the Court in his favour from the beginning. As the prosecution puts its case it is an easy matter, given the natural prejudices of the jury, to make Magwitch into the villain and Compeyson into the foolish young man led astray by a hardened criminal, since this is what they want to believe. The outcome is only to be expected, merely putting the official seal of the law upon social hypocrisy - 'ain't it him as the Judge is sorry for, because he might a done so well, and ain't it me as the Judge perceives to be an old offender of violent passion, likely to come to worse?',<sup>13</sup>

Parallel to this kind of social alienation is spiritual ignorance and isolation. These outcasts from genteel society look no more for divine compassion than they do for man's. Hugh laughs at the idea of saying his prayers. Magwitch sees the bible only as it has manifested itself in his experience as part of the mysterious machinery of authority and coercion, and he uses it in a fetishistic way to swear men to secrecy. For the brickmaker in Bleak House there is no distinction at all between social and spiritual acceptance; both are equally out of the question for people like him - 'No, I don't never mean for to go to church. I shouldn't be expected there, if I did; the beadle's too gen-teel for me'.<sup>14</sup> As the civic

<sup>13</sup> G.E., p. 333.

<sup>14</sup> B.H., p. 107.

authorities see him as a case in need of coercion, so too do the spiritual. Mrs Pardiggle 'pulled out a good book, as if it were a constable's staff, and took the whole family into custody'.<sup>15</sup>

Dickens's attitude to these characters is mixed. There is certainly a measure of fear and repulsion in his regard. In some ways, and especially in their lack of Christian belief, they seem little better than animals - and potentially dangerous animals at that. The grotesque cartoons current in Britain during the French Revolution showing the bestiality of the godless sans-culottes lurk somewhere in the depths of Dickens's mind as he contemplates Hugh's uncontrolled passion:

'I mayn't have much head master, but I've head enough to remember those that use me ill. You shall see, and so shall he, and so shall hundreds more, how my spirit backs me when the time comes. My bark is nothing to my bite. Some that I know had better have a wild lion among them than me, when I am fairly loose - they had!' 16

This same image and its threat recurs in Bleak House when Jo is compared unfavourably in point of training with a sheep dog awaiting his master outside a public house. 'Turn that dog's descendants wild, like Jo, and in a very few years they will so degenerate that they will lose even their bark - but not their bite'.<sup>17</sup> The centrality of this warning to the whole novel is emphasized by Dickens's choice of it as illustration for the title page of the first edition. It is

<sup>15</sup> B.H., p. 107.

<sup>16</sup> B.R., p. 304.

<sup>17</sup> B.H., p. 222.

hard perhaps to imagine Jo biting anyone, but a sense of repulsion lingers in the description of him plucking at his old fur cap as if it were some mangy bird he were about to eat raw. Magwitch appears to Pip to be like a dog in his savage way of eating and on his return he is shunned with abhorrence as if 'he had been some terrible beast.'<sup>18</sup> The same kind of emotive imagery describes Gaffer Hexam as 'half savage', 'a bird of prey'.<sup>19</sup>

However, mixed with his fear is a stronger sense of the injustice suffered, and in the presentation of Hugh in Barnaby Rudge, this latter feeling of sympathy gains the upper hand. Hugh becomes steadily more heroic in stature as the novel progresses. As Dickens's passionate rage at repression and arbitrary authority sweeps him up into the fine, energetic enthusiasm which describes the mob breaking into the prison, so too, his generous and instinctive championship of the downtrodden poor, floods the characterization of Hugh with qualities of leadership and charisma which may be moving, but are hardly artistically convincing. Later novels bring steadier realism to the treatment of these types of characters, Dickens's pity fusing with his fear in the image of animals goaded like cattle beyond endurance:

<sup>18</sup> G.E., p. 304.

<sup>19</sup> O.M.F., pp. 1, 3.



Jo, and the other lower animals, get on in the unintelligible mess as they can. It is market day. The blinded oxen, over-goaded, over-driven, never guided, run into wrong places and are beaten out; and plunge, red-eyed and foaming, at stone walls; and often sorely hurt the innocent, and often sorely hurt themselves. Very like Jo and his order; very, 20 very like!

In Great Expectations Dickens pushes the analogy further to make a yet more savage attack upon the inhumanity and cruelty of laws which regulate society for the benefit of the respectable. Magwitch, a 'hunted, wounded, shackled creature' is taken to await trial for a capital offence at Newgate which, with Smithfield, a 'shameful place, being all asmeared with filth and fat and blood and foam', taints the centre of London.<sup>21</sup>

Although Hugh is the only one of these social victims to be transformed into heroic proportions, Dickens cannot permit the humanity of the others to be shown negatively as simply a capacity for suffering. Even as sordid an old wretch as Alice Marwood's mother is allowed some groping instinct towards higher feelings and more human affections:

Her mother, after watching her for some time without speaking, ventured to steal her withered hand a little nearer to her across the table; and finding she permitted this, to touch her face and smooth her hair. ... She admired her daughter and was afraid of her. Perhaps her admiration, such as it was, had originated long ago, when she first found anything that was beautiful appearing in the midst of the squalid fight 22 of her existence.

20 B.H., p. 221.

21 G.E., p. 155.

22 D.S., pp. 489-490.

Magwitch responds with love and gratitude to the instinctive kindness of young Pip, and Gaffer Hexam is similarly humanized by love for his daughter Lizzie. When she faints, 'he raised her with utmost tenderness, calling her the best of daughters'.<sup>23</sup> Such tenderness lifts these most brutalized members of society not only above the beasts with whom they are so frequently compared, but above many of their more fortunate and respectable fellow citizens. Alice Marwood repents of the harm she seeks to bring upon Carker as he has never repented the ruin he brought upon her life. Jo is the only one to weep over the shameful grave of Nemo, and while society casts his body into a place of obscenity, Jo sweeps clean its entrance in an act of love. Pip himself comes to appreciate the lesson in humanity taught by Magwitch, wretched outcast though he is:

I only saw a man who had meant to be my benefactor, and who had felt affectionately, gratefully, and generously, towards me with great constancy through a series of years. I only saw in him a much better man than I had been to Joe. 24

Thus these social victims in Dickens's novels, especially from the middle period of his writing onwards, provide a focus for two almost contradictory emotions. On the surface they are often held up as objects of fear, a warning to society against its continued neglect of the poverty and inequality in the midst of its growing affluence. At a deeper level, however, they are elevated into spiritual

<sup>23</sup> O.M.F., p. 76.

<sup>24</sup> G.E., p. 423.

examples, showing by force of contrast the inhumanity and moral hypocrisy of respectable society from which they are rigorously excluded. Through the sympathetic, imaginative pressures of Dickens's narratives the judged often become the judges.

This pattern of contrast and parallel between the social and the spiritual, or between this-worldly and other-worldly concerns in Dickens's treatment of such types is expanded in Bleak House to become the major structural device of the novel, formalized in the division of the story between the two narrators.

Esther presents a limited, particularized, human view of events. Writing within an orderly, chronological framework, her past-tense narrative forges a logical, common-sense chain of cause and effect. The other impersonal narrator, as we realize immediately we begin to read, suffers no restriction as to time or place. His viewpoint is omniscient and universal. Stylistically, Bleak House is the most striking of Dickens's novels and the implication of the style matches its conceptual ambition. Long before the advent of the cinema, Dickens exploits the duality of vision provided by a modern camera for panoramic vision and close-up intensity. The prose scans, with an objective, bird's-eye view, wide city vistas of mud, fog and generalized crowds, to zoom in suddenly on sharply particularized little



scenes, like that of the wrathful captain warm in his cabin while his apprentice shivers up on the exposed deck. The range of geological reference in the novel is immense, moving easily from the antediluvian forests of Dedlock timber to the dying fires of the sun. Spatially the scale is equally great. No other novel by Dickens is so concerned with geography. Alan Woodcourt sails to India, Mrs Jellyby arranges missions and emigration for Africa, and Mrs Bagnet, like a humble Britannia, plants her faded umbrella like a union jack all over the globe. Matching this concern with the British Empire are the numerous classical references in the text. It is as if the history of the world is supported on two imperial columns; at one distant end stands the classical edifice of Rome, balanced at the other by the might of the British Empire. Such worldly greatness appears to make little impression upon the omniscient narrator. From his vast overview the solar system provides the scale by which the importance of the fashionable and political world is measured and the irony is cosmic. 'The fashionable world - tremendous orb, nearly five miles round - is in full swing, and the solar system works respectfully at its appointed distances'.<sup>25</sup> To such an observer the causal importance and consequence of man's manifold activities implicated by Esther's past-tense narrative, shrinks to the arbitrary image of a 'great teetotum ... set up for its daily spin'.<sup>26</sup> No real comfort is

<sup>25</sup> B.H., p. 650.

<sup>26</sup> B.H., p. 221.

offered by the analogy with Rome either, for again the voice of the narrator making these references is almost always ironic, and the allegorical hand on Mr Tulkinghorn's ceiling points insistently to the fall of past world systems of power. Even the persistent tree analogy in Bleak House so favoured by conservative thinkers like Edmund Burke for expressing the organic nature of the state, with roots sinking deep into history and tradition, is undermined in the novel by continual mention of dead trees and rotten wood. When the narrator turns from London to describe Chesney Wold he is careful to bring to our ears the sound of the woodman's axe.

Such objectivity and ironic focus is denied the human participants in the novel, who are all caught up within one or other of the particular systems and consequently have a much more limited view as to what comprises reality. They may not be such extreme cases as Jo, knowing nothing, but a great many of them know surprisingly little - the dominant mode of consciousness in the novel is like Jo's in being one of perplexity, confusion and suspicion. This is caused by the enclosed nature of the little worlds they inhabit which appear to be almost hermetically sealed off from wider reality. Ironically in a novel which refers continually to empires, the vision of individuals encompasses but the narrowest of range. Like the inhabitants of the fashionable world they all appear to be 'wrapped up in too much jewellers' cotton and fine wool, and cannot hear the

rushing of the larger worlds, and cannot see them as they circle round the sun'.<sup>27</sup> As with Grandfather Smallweed's body, such lack of free circulation leads to paralysis and inner collapse. Bleak House contrasts with these muffled worlds in the novel having an exposed sound and an owner who is vulnerable to the east wind. Esther tells Richard that John Jarndyce 'has resolutely kept himself outside the circle'.<sup>28</sup>

She is not completely right however. Mr Jarndyce may have avoided enclosure in the kind of paranoid world which captures Richard, but he has not been able to escape wholly the spinning systems of which the novel is composed. He is, as he admits, caught up in the 'infernal country dance of costs and fees' called Chancery, forever 'revolving about the Lord Chancellor and all his satellites' in a waltz to 'dusty death' unable 'to get out of the suit on any terms, for we are made parties to it, and must be parties to it whether we like it or not'.<sup>29</sup> Caddy Jellyby and her husband are caught up in a similar macabre dance, waltzing themselves to death in blind homage to old Turveydrop. Thus does the gaunt, blind horse at the brick kiln move round all day in the mill which 'looks like an instrument of human torture', and thus does Jo move on continually, not knowing why he travels or where he goes.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> B.H., p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> B.H., p. 525.

<sup>29</sup> B.H., pp. 95-6.

<sup>30</sup> B.H., p. 767.



The perpetual, helpless, circling movement of those who become, like Jo or Richard or Lady Dedlock, victims of a system, resembles the restless, purposeless pacing of caged animals or the motion of the damned in torment.

To those trapped within, it does indeed seem that they, like John Jarndyce, are made parties to it and must be; that the systems are impersonal forces, and any attempt to attribute blame, quite pointless. Lady Dedlock speaks of her future as a road following an inexorably predestined path - 'The dark road I have trodden for so many years will end where it will', she tells Esther fatalistically.<sup>31</sup> Esther's own dream while she is ill gives clearest expression to the sense of hopeless suffering inflicted upon the unwilling participants of these fast-gripping systems in the novel. Strung up as a bead upon a flaming circle in the unreality of 'a great black space' her only prayer is to be taken off from the rest 'it was such inexplicable agony and misery to be part of the dreadful thing'.<sup>32</sup> This sense of the inexplicable, impersonal nature of systems tends to induce a sense of doomed resignation to events, like that shown by Jo, Lady Dedlock, Mr Snagsby and many other characters. If life is controlled by arbitrary, non-human forces, resistance is useless. Efforts to change things are powerless if the future is already predestined.

However, this lack of belief in the efficacy of human

31 B.H., p. 511.

32 B.H., p. 489.

causality is not shared by every character in the novel. The systems of law, government, social and religious groupings, wealth and poverty may appear impersonal, but the novel makes very explicit that they are man-made. It is an instrument of human torture the mill resembles and its horse is chained to the wheel by human hands, just as Caddy and Prince are chained to their sense of obligation by the insidious rhetoric of old Turveydrop. Esther, outside that little world has no difficulty in seeing its human causation. To poor mad Miss Flite the seemingly arbitrary power of the law over human life assumes a fetishistic authority. Its awful influence is only explicable by endowing its outward symbols, the Mace and Seal, with inner supernatural force. Mr Jarndyce is not so primitively superstitious but his rigid avoidance of any contact with Chancery expresses his fear that its enmeshing power cannot be destroyed by human agency. Mr Kenge attempts to assuage his doubts about the ultimate justice of its purpose with imposing rhetoric which links the greatness of England with the greatness of its legal system, but as he speaks he seems 'to spread the cement of his words on the structure of the system, and consolidate it for a thousand ages'.<sup>33</sup> Conversation Kenge is one of the human constructors of system in the novel, building up a screen of words between his victims and reality, as do Turveydrop and Chadband, both of whose oratory consists of

<sup>33</sup> B.H., p. 844.

'piling up verbose flights of stairs' - labouring up which was another of Esther's feverish nightmares.<sup>34</sup> The reification of man-made, social, legal and religious structures is eagerly abetted by these verbal engineers since the structures they build minister to their egoism and material greed, while the common belief that their systems are impersonal forces, shelters them from blame for any suffering inflicted and discourages attempts at reform or change. The other manipulators of these reified systems are those like Tulkynghorn and Smallweed who exploit the blindness and ignorance of reality such structures impose on their victims in order to extend their own realm of power and ascendancy. Jo's total ignorance is only an extreme form of the mystification which allows so many of the characters to be robbed of their autonomy. Almost the only character who refuses to be blinded and who clings stubbornly to a sense of human responsibility is Gridley. His continually frustrated insistence that the system which victimizes him is of man's creation and therefore controllable by man wears away his vitality, but it is significant that the only alternative he sees to this is to succumb to madness; to fall like Miss Flite into fetishistic reverence for the very instruments which torture him, just as Caddy and Prince pay deferential homage to their tyrant, Turveydrop.

Law is only the most obvious and fully explored of

<sup>34</sup> B.H., p. 264.



reified systems in Bleak House. Its nature as the formal instrument of social control makes it the obvious choice for this representative role, but I think Dickens picks it also because it embodies the formal system by which men judge their fellows and officially bestow guilt or innocence upon them, and this is what the novel is all about.

Bleak House dramatizes two contending views of salvation which share the pattern of contrast between the universal and the particular which structures the whole work at both formal and conceptual levels. Esther's instinctive faith is in a universal heavenly father who loves and cares for the well-being of all his children upon earth, rich or poor, weak or strong, good or bad. Her narrative is scattered with grateful references to Providence, and other generous-hearted characters associated with Esther, like John Jarndyce and George Rouncewell, also make use of the expression. The close association of the concept with Esther is made apparent by the secular definition of the word in the Oxford English Dictionary as 'prudent management, thrift and timely preparation', which the religious meaning extends to 'the foresight and benevolent care of God'. Opposed to this kindly view of divine concern with all human life is the Calvinist one expressed by characters like Esther's god-mother, the Chadbands and Mrs Snagsby, who preach the narrow vengeful creed of a god who visits the sins of parents upon the heads of innocent children, and who

chooses only the few elect as recipients of divine grace, dooming the rest of mankind to eternal damnation. Discussing this view in his study of Calvin, Francois Wendel makes the point, 'predestination can in fact be regarded as in some respects a particular application of the more general notion of Providence'.<sup>35</sup> Calvin himself makes the particularity of his concept of God's concern with the eternal fate of each individual very clear: 'We call predestination the eternal decree of God by which he decided what he would do with each man. For he does not create them all in like condition, but ordains some to eternal life, the others to eternal damnation'.<sup>36</sup> Calvin's view of God is very far from Esther's belief in a compassionate father. 'If we ask why God takes pity on some, and why he lets go of the others and leaves them, there is no other answer but that it pleased him to do so'.<sup>37</sup> Calvin admitted that if thought of according to human reason such a decree 'ought to appal us'.<sup>38</sup> Dickens finds it appalling according to any reasoning, but is more prepared to subscribe such lack of compassion to human agency than divine.<sup>39</sup> To a friend just bereft of her husband he wrote:

<sup>35</sup> Calvin: The Origins and Development of his Religious Thought, translated by Philip Mairet, Fontana Library edition (London, 1965), p. 178.

<sup>36</sup> Wendel, p. 272.

<sup>37</sup> Wendel, pp. 272-3.

<sup>38</sup> Wendel, p. 281.

<sup>39</sup> For a rather different opinion of Dickens's views of election see Alexander Welsh's discussion in The City of Dickens (London, 1971), pp. 83-5.

There would be happier lives and happier Deaths, perhaps, if we read our Saviour's preaching a little more, and let each other alone. If men invest the Deity with their own passions, so much the worse for them. He remains the same; and if there be any Truth in anything about us, and it be not all one vast deceit, he is full of Mercy and Compassion, and looks to what his creatures do, and not to what they think. 40

Dickens seems to have in mind here the gospel account of the Last Judgement in which Christ explains to his sheep that 'I was hungered and ye gave me meat ... Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me' - words quoted by John Jarndyce when he discovers Mrs Blinder's kindness to the Neckett children.<sup>41</sup> Indeed in Bleak House, in direct contrast to David Copperfield, the poor are known continually by their works of kindness. The brickmakers' wives share each other's burdens; Jo gets medicine for them; Guster gives her own supper to Jo; Mrs Bagnet finds George's mother; and George himself offers shelter and comfort to a variety of life's outcasts.

Just as a belief in reified systems renders human action pointless, so good works count for nothing in Calvin's creed. Each man's eternal destiny is preordained by God and nothing that he does on earth can change that fate. 'It cannot be', Calvin writes, 'that the true members of the elect people of God should in the end perish or be lost. Their salvation has such sure and firm supports that even if the whole machine of the world broke down, this could not fall'.<sup>42</sup> However, while it is God's grace alone which saves

40 Letters, IV, (1977), 108.

41 Matthew 25. 35-40.

42 Wendel, p. 278.



the elect, do what they may on earth, and his denial of grace which dooms the reprobate, their respective inner states can be expected to appear visibly in their outer lives. 'Election', explains Wendel, 'manifests itself, indeed, by clear and positive signs in the lives of the elect and more particularly by the calling, and the righteousness which expresses it in concrete reality'.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, insists Calvin, 'all those who are of the number of the reprobate, as they are instruments made for opprobrium, never cease to provoke the wrath of God by endless crimes, and to confirm by obvious signs the judgement of God that is decreed against them'.<sup>44</sup>

This is the belief which gives gentility its tremendous power. Outward appearance and behaviour are held to be manifestations of election, the signs of grace in chosen people. Rough appearance and manner are not only socially condemned, but are signs of eternal damnation and other men are justified in avoidance and abhorrence. Thus, in Victorian England, class for many becomes the outward sign of inner grace, or its absence. This is the judgement at the heart of Bleak House; the point where particular and general, social and spiritual meet and interlock. In Portrait of an Age, G.M. Young writes, 'a more than casual analogy could be established between Grace and Corruption and the Respectable and the Low'.<sup>45</sup> Although Young

<sup>43</sup> Wendel, p. 275.

<sup>44</sup> Wendel, p. 283.

<sup>45</sup> Young, p. 2.

dismisses Dickens's political satire as 'tedious and ignorant',<sup>46</sup> Dickens does establish in Bleak House just such a non-casual relationship, showing the integral connection between moral and social judgements and their use as a psychological tool to justify and maintain the privileged hierarchical structure and unequal distribution of power, wealth and dignity in a class society. This interrelation between gentility and morality is revealed in linguistic duality. According to the OED, the word 'grace' refers, in a social dimension, to that gift of 'ease and refinement' in form or manner which was felt to indicate good-breeding. As such it was the favourite term of commendation used by Lord Chesterfield. But 'grace' as a gift of God is also a sign of election; that the fortunate individual is singled out from the reprobate as one of God's chosen people. The two parallel senses of 'the elect' as either the specially preferred by God, or the most eminent people socially, were both still current in Dickens's time although 'elite' was beginning to be favoured in the social context.<sup>47</sup> Everywhere in Bleak House Dickens presses home his meaning by playing upon this revealing identity of language. Jo is a 'graceless

<sup>46</sup> Young, p. 29.

<sup>47</sup> Dickens uses the word 'elect' in a social sense even later, in Great Expectations, where Bentley Drummle is referred to as 'one of the elect', p. 181. For a discussion of the changing meaning of this word see Raymond Williams, Keywords. (London, 1976), pp. 96-8.

creature', an 'unimprovable reprobate', Mrs Pardiggle praises Mr Gusher's ability to 'improve almost any occasion' and Mr Kenge exclaims of a will that it is 'a perfect instrument', the same phrase used of Jo by Chadband.<sup>48</sup>

In Bleak House those who see themselves as elect or chosen people are not only the narrowly religious like Esther's godmother and Mrs Snagsby, but all that little social world represented by Sir Leicester Dedlock. It is an absolute article of their social faith that they 'are the great actors for whom the stage is reserved ... [that] Boodle and Buffy, their followers and families, their heirs, executors, administrators and assigns are the first-born actors, managers and leaders, and no others can appear upon the scene for ever and ever'.<sup>49</sup> Even the rhythm of the prose here plays upon the rhythm of prayer. To these socially elect, good works are also irrelevant, and like Calvin they believe their salvation to be sure even though 'the whole machine of the world' should break down, as indeed it seems to be doing in the novel. This is why the success of Rouncewell, the Ironmaster, so disturbs Sir Leicester - it is in direct opposition to his dogma of social predestination. In David Copperfield, although Dickens exposes the hollowness of the aristocratic heroic ideal in the character of Steerforth, he cannot bring himself to destroy it. In Bleak House, the parasitic

<sup>48</sup> B.H., pp. 149, 361, 103, 843.

<sup>49</sup> B.H., p. 161.



corruption lurking behind the aristocratic myth of born to rule is as precisely laid bare, but again Dickens cannot bring himself to abase the ideal. Sir Leicester and even his hangers-on are treated gently by his satire and the fiercest attack upon the evil of a non-working aristocracy is displaced on to the figures of Turveydrop and Skimpole.

Through the angry old woman at the dancing academy Dickens expresses his full sense of the viciousness of the belief that the many are born merely as instruments, predestined by God to labour out their lives to support the useless luxury of the few. Like the working class generally, Turveydrop's meek little wife has 'toiled and laboured' to allow her husband to 'lead an idle life in the very best clothes'.<sup>50</sup> Also like a good section of the working class she looks up to this model of aristocratic Deportment to the last with 'pride and deference'.<sup>51</sup> Her son is brought up in 'the same faith', willing to sacrifice himself and his family for a shoddy ideal.<sup>52</sup> In Skimpole, Dickens provides the aristocracy with a persuasive and seductive counsel for the defence. His light-hearted exposition of the drone philosophy, his epicurean delight in luxury, and his poetic sensibility to the suffering of others which adds piquancy to his own ease, are expressed always with a captivating charm and urbane frankness which are the epitome of social grace and good-breeding. Skimpole

<sup>50</sup> B.H., p. 192.

<sup>51</sup> B.H., p. 192.

<sup>52</sup> B.H., p. 192.

is a much more dangerous creature than Turveydrop because so much more difficult to attack. Who would dare to break such a butterfly against the vulgar wheels of earnestness, justice and equality? <sup>53</sup> Turveydrop, too, is the dying dandy of the past, but in Skimpole, Dickens prophesies the threat from dandies of the future.

Like Sir Leicester and Turveydrop, Skimpole is a strong believer in social predestination, providing always that the world admit him to the company of the drones. It is not surprising therefore that Dickens has him singing one of Isaac Watts' little songs, for Watts is of like opinion concerning the eternal settlement of social orders.<sup>54</sup> Writing in support of charity schools for the poor, he declares:

I would persuade myself that the masters and mistresses of these schools among us teach the children of the poor which are under their care to know what their station in life is, how mean their circumstances, how necessary 'tis for them to be diligent, laborious, honest and faithful, humble and submissive, what duties they owe the rest of mankind and particularly <sup>55</sup> to their superiors.

Esther is not a child of the poor, but according to her godmother's religion her spiritual fate is as lowly and

<sup>53</sup> Q.D. Leavis suggests that in Bleak House the influence of Pope upon Dickens is apparent. If she is correct then Skimpole surely owes something to Lord Hervey? Dickens the Novelist, p. 144.

<sup>54</sup> Even earlier, in The Old Curiosity Shop, Dickens shows his distaste for Watts' moral and social views, when Miss Monflathers, an unpleasant and snobbish school-teacher, quotes him for the edification of Little Nell. O.C.S., p. 236.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Quinlan, p. 21.



irreversible as the social position of charity children, and again the fusion of social and moral judgement in gentility is revealed by a striking identity of language - 'Submission, self-denial, diligent work, are the preparations for a life begun with such a shadow on it', she tells Esther.<sup>56</sup> Sarah Trimmer, another enthusiastic Evangelical enlightener of the poor is even more zealous than Watts in her care that the lower orders do not forget their social predestination any more than their spiritual. She sharply criticizes the practice introduced in some Sunday schools of rewarding boys who act upon 'noble principles'. This she felt to be almost seditious since such boys taught to consider themselves noble might aspire to become 'nobles of the land and to take the place of the hereditary nobility'.<sup>57</sup> She would have disapproved strongly of Esther's recognition of 'nobility in the soul of a labouring man's daughter'.<sup>58</sup> For the outward signs of a lack of grace are set visibly upon the working class; they

<sup>56</sup> B.H., pp. 17-18.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Quinlan, p. 169. It is possible that in Bleak House, Dickens is making an even more specific attack upon the Evangelicals and their conservative political influence than I have suggested. Mrs Pardiggle is certainly intended to recall Hannah More, and during a Parliamentary debate of 1817 on the suspension of Habeas Corpus, Francis Burdett actually quoted from the account of the Last Judgement in Matthew 18, in an attempt to shame Wilberforce into a more merciful attitude - the text to which Dickens also refers constantly in the novel. For an account of this incident and for other interesting information about the political activities of the Evangelicals see J.L. Hammond and Barbara Hammond, The Town Labourer, edited by John Lovell (London, 1978), pp. 150-170.

<sup>58</sup> B.H., p. 507.



are clearly 'instruments made for opprobrium', man's as well as God's. Thus is Jo doubly damned, like the place he lives in, Tom-all-Alone's - 'cut off from honest company and put out of the pale of hope'.<sup>59</sup>

But the very duality of the judgement suggests the truth. As with seemingly impersonal systems like law, this is not divine predestination but man's. Dickens saw as clearly as Feuerbach or Marx that human beings reify their own qualities for good or evil, but especially the latter, into the person of their creator, although he did not, like them, take this as evidence that the creator did not exist at all. The belief in election, social or divine, belongs unequivocally to the particular human dimension of Bleak House. It is the world of men which visits the sins of the fathers upon their children. All through the novel Dickens exhibits children neglected by their parents and then abused by the world. Guster's patron saint at Tooting is remarkably human in his ability to cast a blight upon her future life. Her fits are not visitations of divine wrath but the ugly manifestation of man's vengeful treatment of the weak and helpless in his midst. It is the world of men too, not God, which does not create all its children 'in like condition', that visits the lives of the few with grace and lets others go because it pleases it to do so. Outward signs on those like Jo who has precious little chance of ever improving his outer self are all too useful

<sup>59</sup> B.H., p. 220.

to those who wish to justify their own material comfort and gentility with a sense of moral and social predestination.

In David Copperfield, Ham is out-manoeuvred in every way by his graceful social rival, Steerforth, and not least because Ham himself tacitly accedes in the judgement of his worth founded upon his awkward outer appearance. In Bleak House Dickens looks more closely at the psychology of shame and guilt as it is used as a means of social control. He does this through two closely linked case studies; Esther with her sense of moral disgrace, and Jo, an outcast from genteel society. According to Forster, Jo was to have filled a larger space in the novel.<sup>60</sup> It seems likely that Dickens soon realized how difficult it is to convey a mentality as untaught and unconceptual as Jo's and yet allow it to reflect meaningfully upon its experiences. Critics have been quick to notice the unconvincingly sophisticated nature of his comments upon Mr Chadband and other zealous missionaries to Tom-all-Alone's. Esther is one means of overcoming this problem. Like Jo she suffers innocently for the sins of society against her. From the beginning of both their stories in the novel Dickens links them carefully together, not only through the bond of disease. Early we see them both weep at the burial of the one friend to share their lonely life - Esther for her doll and Jo for Nemo. Both remember with gratitude any small

<sup>60</sup> Forster, II, 119.

kindnesses shown them. For both, brooms are used symbolically to indicate their good qualities. Because of the mysterious nature of her birth, Esther too, feels the world to be a strange and puzzling place. As a child she has 'a silent way of noticing what passed before me, and thinking I should like to understand it better'.<sup>61</sup> Thus thinks Jo, sitting on doorsteps to eat his breakfast crust in Tom-all-Alone's. Most important of all, Esther shares with Jo the sense of being separate and different from other people, a sense driven home by her aunt's insistence that she is 'orphaned and degraded', 'set apart'.<sup>62</sup> Unlike Jo, Esther is sensitively and painfully aware of the full implications of being different from her fellow beings and so through her reflections Dickens can express the sense of shame and moral guilt felt as a consequence of men's judgement.

Esther is not a wholly successful character in the novel, but she becomes more interesting when one realizes that Dickens does not see her as simply a perfect ideal of caring, self-sacrificing womanhood. She is in fact shown to be deeply scarred by the sense of unworthiness inflicted upon her in her unhappy childhood, full of self-doubt and potentially dangerous self-abnegation. From the first she is made to feel poor and trifling by her aunt's chilling disapproval and the cruel revelation on her birthday confirms

<sup>61</sup> B.H., p. 15.

<sup>62</sup> B.H., p. 18.



her belief that she is unlovable. Dickens, as always, conveys the child's puzzled comprehension of unmerited cruelty with poignant insight - 'Imperfect as my understanding of my sorrow was, I knew that I had brought no joy, at any time, to anybody's heart, and that I was to no-one upon earth what Dolly was to me'.<sup>63</sup> Against such a bleak assessment of personal worth a child can bring no appeal. The implication for social control of such destruction of self-pride is made clear by Dickens. Esther becomes 'timid and retiring', her sense of unworthiness causing her to feel a debt of gratitude to her aunt, the very person responsible for her suffering, just as Prince and Caddy are grateful to Turveydrop, and Miss Flite to the Chancellor. She accepts the sentence issued upon her of a life of submission and self-denial, humbly resolving 'to repair the fault I had been born with (of which I confessedly felt guilty and yet innocent), and ... strive ... to be industrious, contented and kind-hearted'.<sup>64</sup>

It is Esther's doubt about her ability to win the affection and approval of her fellow beings that accounts for her sad little habit of coyly totting up all the kind things said about her by those she meets and helps. It is the emotional credit account she balances against the urgent need she has to feel wanted and accepted by her own kind. The same disbelief in her worth motivates her many assertions

<sup>63</sup> B.H., p. 18.

<sup>64</sup> B.H., p. 18.

that she is not pretty and the irritating over-insistent praise of Ada's beauty. Esther is actually very concerned indeed with her outward appearance, wants to be pretty in order to be liked, half suspects she may be, but does not dare to believe she is. Her frequent statements concerning her own plainness have the underlying ring of someone hoping to be contradicted. Her disfigurement by smallpox shows a superb psychological understanding by Dickens. To Esther it presents a terrible temptation to interpret it as the final confirming outward sign of her inner lack of grace. After her recovery each meeting with an old acquaintance becomes an anxious occasion of renewed self-doubt as she watches their faces for any betrayal of rejection or disgust. The shock of discovering her real mother, coming fast upon the physical scarring of her face, precipitates her back to the old sense that she is totally unwanted in the world - her birth a disastrous mistake for which she must be punished ever after. 'I felt as if the blame and the shame were all in me, and the visitation had come down'.<sup>65</sup> However, the loving letters she receives the next day from Ada and her guardian turn her back to a happier view of divine Providence and in her conclusions Dickens carefully draws together the interlocked ideas of social and spiritual predestination - 'I knew I was as innocent of my birth as a queen of hers; and that before my Heavenly Father I should not be punished for birth, nor

<sup>65</sup> B.H., p. 514.

a queen rewarded for it'.<sup>66</sup> Only the constant reassuring love of those around her finally dissolves all that early sense of guilt and moral unworthiness which shadow her life, and Dickens ends her story upon a pleasant note of playful irony - Esther almost admits, but not quite aloud, that she is indeed pretty; that she possesses outer and inner grace.

The signs of Jo's lack of grace are many and obvious - covered by filth, sores and parasites, he is like 'a growth of fungus or any other unwholesome excrescence'.<sup>67</sup> Like Esther he is set apart, shunned by all but the lowest dregs of society. The inquest on Nemo records humanity's verdict on Jo as well: 'It's terrible depravity. Put the boy aside'.<sup>68</sup> Just as according to Calvinist doctrine, those put aside by God, become merely instruments by which he works his ends, so Jo from this point on becomes an instrument for most of the other characters in the novel, never an end in himself. In absolute mockery of his own inflated rhetoric which rightly calls Jo 'a gem' and a 'pearl' by virtue of his humanity, Chadband simply uses the boy to minister to his own spiritual egoism. For Mrs Snagsby, Jo is the means by which she hopes to trap her husband, for Lady Dedlock a way of discovering more about Nemo, and for Tulkinghorn a pawn in his game of power with her ladyship. Even Inspector Buckett puts the convenience

<sup>66</sup> B.H., p. 516.

<sup>67</sup> B.H., p. 631.

<sup>68</sup> B.H., p. 148.



of his rich client before any humanitarian concern with the boy's welfare. Jo does not exist for any of them as an autonomous human being. Like the working class generally, if he can not be of use he is in the way, and Buckett the paid representative of the forces of law expresses respectable society's feeling on the matter, 'Hook it! Nobody wants you here.'<sup>69</sup>

However, such is Jo's isolation and ignorance that he feels none of Esther's self-alienating shame. He answers the coroner and Inspector Buckett with none of Esther's timid self-depreciation. Although Lady Dedlock shudders visibly at the thought of merely touching his hand Jo is not perturbed by her reaction. When she asks with abhorrence whether Nemo looked as awful as himself, Jo reassures her with an easy acceptance of the world and himself, 'O not so bad as me ... I'm a reg'lar one I am!'<sup>70</sup> Like the golden cross high upon St Paul's the distance between himself and the respectable is too great to allow Jo to draw any meaningful relationship between them and himself. His only sense of kinship is with similar outcasts and sufferers like the harassed law-writer, Nemo, and the beaten wives of the brickmakers.

Slowly, through the course of the novel, Jo is brought into closer and closer contact with respectable society. First Mr Snagsby makes his symbolic gesture of sympathy

<sup>69</sup> B.H., p. 634.

<sup>70</sup> B.H., p. 223.

with half-a-crown, and then Guster, full of fellow feeling startles him by patting him gently on the shoulder, 'the first time in his life that any decent hand has been so laid upon him'.<sup>71</sup> Charlie Neckett feels a similar compassion, and so Jo is brought into contact with Esther, and through her with John Jarndyce, Alan Woodcourt, George Rouncewell and Phil, all those that comfort the last days of his life. With ironic inevitability, as he is thus warmed into a brief, fully-conscious human existence he is afflicted with shame and a sense of guilt. Kindness and trust are potent where the sermons of Chadband and the harrying of Mrs Snagsby fail. Lying in the midst of a group of people he recognizes as generous and disinterested, who treat him fully as a fellow creature in need of help rather than a means to some end of their own, Jo becomes aware of what it means to be different and far off. He senses, for the first time, human qualities which have been quite outside the compass of his experience, and with this recognition of his own alienation comes a need to be accepted. However, like Esther earlier in her life, the perception of the vast difference between himself and them fills him with a consciousness of personal deficiency. Already in the novel, Dickens has demonstrated the quick submissiveness of the humble in bowing their heads to injustice and harsh treatment, and even looking up to those who are its cause. Not only Esther, but Miss Flite, Caddy,

<sup>71</sup> B.H., p. 362.

the brickmakers' wives, and Guster all accept suffering deferentially, without a stir of rebellion, as their predestined lot in life. It is not surprising, therefore, that Jo, who 'don't expect nothink at all' should try instinctively to propitiate the world of men and seek election to its fellowship by humbly taking upon himself its debts and omissions.<sup>72</sup> If he does not belong, he is ready to ascribe it to his own lack of grace. As he admits, 'Who ud go and let a nice innocent lodging to such a reg-lar one as me!' and this despite his truthful declaration to Alan Woodcourt; 'I never was in no other trouble at all, sir - 'sept not knowin' nothink and starvation'.<sup>73</sup> Jo cannot be held responsible for Esther's smallpox, as Esther herself knows, but, like that archetypal lowly Man, and like many more of his own class, Jo voluntarily accepts the blame for the sins society has committed against him.<sup>74</sup> Sensing in Mr Snagsby yet another submissive scapegoat, and realizing at last the full potency of symbolic outward signs, he asks the law-stationer to write out for him 'werry large so that anyone could see it anywheres, as that I was werry truly hearty sorry that I done it'.<sup>75</sup> The

<sup>72</sup> B.H., p. 267.

<sup>73</sup> B.H., pp. 266, 641.

<sup>74</sup> This identification of Jo, as scapegoat of society, with Christ is not so unlikely as it seems. In Great Expectations, Magwitch, another victim figure, comes into Pip's life on Christmas Day, and is sentenced to death in April, one of thirty-two so condemned - Christ's age at the time of his crucifixion.

<sup>75</sup> B.H., p. 647.



chapter is entitled 'Jo's Will', and this is his bequest; it is the only thing that society has not begrudged him - a sense of moral guilt. Jo joins the world of men only to be alienated from himself. The artistic logic and social truth of this final irony are impeccable.

Alan Woodcourt's repetition of the Lord's Prayer at Jo's death bed becomes more acceptable once integrated into the pervasive context of allusion to a divine all-caring father in heaven, although one still wishes the same point could have been made less obtrusively. Jo, however, dies before, not after, the line 'Forgive us our trespasses', for despite his own sense of guilt, it is not as a sinner that Jo fulfils his role in Bleak House.

While Jo moves on continually through mid-nineteenth-century England, ugly and distasteful with his filthy rags and ulcerous body, the little world which embraces Sir Leicester tries very hard to stand still or even to move backwards. Turning their eyes away from the reality of Jo, they dream wistfully of making 'the Vulgar very picturesque and faithful, by putting back the hands upon the Clock of Time, and cancelling a few hundred years of history'.<sup>76</sup> Not recognizing himself for the anachronism he is, Sir Leicester firmly believes that the ordering of society and its systems of law and class have been devised 'by the perfection of human wisdom, for the eternal settlement (humanly speaking) of everything'.<sup>77</sup> Again the irony

<sup>76</sup> B.H., p. 160.

<sup>77</sup> B.H., p. 13.

of the impersonal narrator, gently nudging this human arrogance into satiric focus partakes of a divine frame of reference, seeing man's history for the little moment that it is in eternity's span. In fact, contrary to the Dedlocks' composed belief in the continuity of things, all the signs in the novel suggest that time is running out. Images of decay, decomposition and disintegration abound. What is not crumbling into dust appears to be petrifying into stone. Even Volumnia, the last withered leaf upon the great Dedlock tree, and one of its most lively and fluttering members in her youth, comes at last to resemble the little glass drops upon the chandeliers of another age. A fitting and poignant metaphor of frozen tears for her wasted life from which the warmth of real feeling was frigidly excluded.

There are other hints that the end may not approach so slowly or so naturally as these images suggest. Charles I's head reappears in this novel; not isolated this time in the delusions of a damaged mind like Mr Dick's in David Copperfield, but fully implicated in the fall of a great house. The hand which points at the dead Tulkinghorn, points to the end of all such tyrants and the woman who shoots him has already reminded Esther of 'some woman from the streets of Paris in the reign of terror'.<sup>78</sup> Needless to say she comes from the region of Marseilles. In an early description of the Court of Chancery and the fashionable

<sup>78</sup> B.H., p. 320.

world the narrator warns that they are 'sleeping beauties, whom the Knight will wake one day, when all the stopped spits in the kitchen shall begin to turn prodigiously!',<sup>79</sup> an image grimly redolent with threat, suggesting the whirring blade of the guillotine only half a century earlier, or the spinning grindstones on which knives were sharpened for violence. As one would expect Dickens's attitude to such possibilities is ambiguous; the tone is fearful, but excited. Some of the most explicitly threatening language is put into the mouth of the obviously favoured character, Boythorn, who declares that nothing will ever reform Chancery except blowing it and all its functionaries into atoms, but then it is also made very clear that while Boythorn enjoys roaring like a tiger, he is very unlikely ever to bite. A much more dangerous case is Richard Carstone in whom injustice breeds injustice and a dangerous despair as to consequences. Mr Weevle shrewdly recognizes Richard's gloomy irritability as a case of 'smouldering combustion'.<sup>80</sup> It is not from those who shout loudly of grievances that danger comes to the established order, but from those who suffer wrong silently and moodily - those who have lost their bark, but not their bite. This is why Jo illustrates the title page of the novel, for his wretched life is the index measuring the level of silent suffering and woe in a country which boasts of wealth and

<sup>79</sup> B.H., p. 8.

<sup>80</sup> B.H., p. 556.



empire. It is perhaps well that Jo and his kind often die young, for the inevitable result of such compound human misery and injustice is that smouldering combustion becomes spontaneous, bringing about 'the death of all Lord Chancellors in all Courts, and of all authorities in all places under all names soever, where false pretences are made, and where injustice is done'.<sup>81</sup>

These threats of revolution or social catastrophe obviously relate to the particular human dimension of the novel, governed by the causal logic of historical time. For Christians there is another day to fear - the Day of Judgement, when the world in general will end, not just one particular little political system in its long history.<sup>82</sup> It is against this day that Esther's godmother issues her terrifying warning, 'Watch ye therefore! lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping'.<sup>83</sup> The words are from Matthew 25, part of the parable of the wise virgins, and it is in keeping with the pervasive irony of the novel that no-one needs this advice less than Esther. There can be little doubt that she is one of the prudent virgins, always busy and striving to bring order and light into her own

<sup>81</sup> B.H., pp. 455-6.

<sup>82</sup> For an illuminating discussion, based upon contemporary articles printed in Household Words, of the development of Dickens's ideas on spontaneous combustion, social discontent, and scientific theory, see Ann Y. Wilkinson, 'Bleak House: From Faraday to Judgement Day', English Literary History, 34 (June, 1967), 225-247.

<sup>83</sup> B.H., p. 19.

small world. The relevance of Matthew 25 to Bleak House does not end there. The parable of the virgins is followed by that of the talents where the foolish servant who does not utilize what has been given him (Richard, Skimpole?) is banished into 'outer darkness'. Jo may shuffle through the world in 'utter darkness as to its meaning', but, unlike the lazy servant, he uses the only poor talent he has to sweep the steps leading to Nemo's grave, and the omniscient narrator passes judgement, 'not quite in outer darkness'.<sup>84</sup> More interesting still, Matthew 25 sheds further light upon the concern with contending views of God's justice in the novel. It closes with the account of the Last Judgement in which the sheep are separated from the goats that they may inherit 'life eternal' - a text of some embarrassment to Calvinists since it insists that the sheep are chosen because of their good works in the world.

In 1844, Dickens wrote of a visit to Genoa:

I thought that of all the mouldy, dreary, sleepy, dirty, lagging, halting, God-forgotten towns in the wide-world, it must be surely the very utmost superlative. It seemed as if one had reached the end of all things - as if there were no more progress, motion, advancement, or improvement of any kind beyond; but here the whole scheme had stopped centuries ago, never to move on any more, but just lying down in the sun to bask there, till the Day  
of Judgement. 85

Several years later this idea is placed at the imaginative centre of a novel about England at the mid-way point of the

<sup>84</sup> B.H., p. 152.

<sup>85</sup> Letters, IV (1977), 169.

nineteenth century. The hints and suggestions of revolution in the historical dimension of the novel are paralleled in the eternal present of the omniscient narrator by the imminence of the Last Day. Indeed, since past, present and future here co-exist, the Day of Judgement is to be thought of as actually taking place during all the temporal events of the novel. Like the Court of Chancery, the heavenly court continues for the duration of human life. God's eternity and man's particular history, God's judgement and man's are juxtaposed ironically and with telling contrast. Everywhere in the novel there appear to be signs that hell and its suffering exists upon earth. Tom-all-Alone's is described consistently as an 'infernal gulf', a 'nether region' inhabited by a wild 'concourse of imprisoned demons'.<sup>86</sup> As already noted, many of the characters enact a living purgatory, never at peace, never still, like Richard or Jo always moving restlessly on, not finding what they seek. However, as with claims for divine election, these worldly sufferings have their causation in human systems, not God's. Tom-all-Alone's is a man-made hell, just as Chancery is man-made justice. As the story of Dives and Lazarus teaches, it is only after the end of the world that the gulf between wealth and poverty becomes impassable, and those who suffer most upon earth are not those condemned for all eternity. It is the rich man then

<sup>86</sup> B.H., pp. 310, 314.



who calls in vain for help. Down in the pit of Tom-all-Alone's the poor die 'like sheep with the rot', but they die as sheep.<sup>87</sup> There are other sheep in the novel too, not so fortunate as those cared for by the well-trained dog which sits by Jo, but those lured away by false shepherds who 'play on Chancery pipes that have no stop, and keep their sheep in the fold by hook and by crook until they have shorn them exceeding close'.<sup>88</sup> No wonder Vholes' office smells of unwholesome sheep. Uncared-for Peepy Jellyby is frequently lost from home on market-day, following the sheep out of town. Jo does not have even that sense of purpose to follow other sheep, but, while he 'is not one of Mrs Jellyby's lambs', he is certainly lost when Phil Squod, looking 'not unlike an old dog of some mongrel breed', 'tacks out, all on one side, to execute the word of command' and bring him in to shelter.<sup>89</sup> The lawyers, of course, all wear wigs made of goat hair.

The biblical references to the Day of Judgement in the text are not limited to St Matthew's Gospel, but extend into the more radical implications of the Book of Revelations. In this respect Bleak House undoubtedly feeds into the tradition of Blake. The signs offered by the evangelist in Revelations as indications of the coming end of the world always provided a fertile source of rhetoric in radical circles for revolutionary denunciations of a corrupt society,

<sup>87</sup> B.H., p. 311.

<sup>88</sup> B.H., p. 663.

<sup>89</sup> B.H., p. 640.

and for millenarian dreams of a New Jerusalem to arise upon the rubble of the old.<sup>90</sup> The specific references in Bleak House again interlock the two dimensions of the novel, leading the spiritual issues back into human affairs and history. In Revelations, the Day of Judgement is announced by the breaking of the seven seals. The destruction of the fourth of these is marked by the appearance of a pale horse whose rider is Death, and in the novel Vholes drives Richard back to London in a mourning-coach pulled by a pale gaunt horse. Miss Flite awaits the breaking of the sixth seal, for then, 'the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men' will flee to the mountains calling upon the rocks to fall and hide them, 'for the great day of his wrath is come'.<sup>91</sup> However, unlike the powerful and worldly, those who 'come out of great tribulation' shall have nothing more to fear. The Lamb 'shall feed them, and shall lead them into living fountains of waters, and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes'.<sup>92</sup> In this New Jerusalem

<sup>90</sup> For a further discussion of this, see E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, pp. 52-8, 419-440. Of particular interest in relation to Bleak House is a quotation given by Thompson, from one of Joanna Southcott's sermons, 'O England! O England! England! The axe is laid to the tree, and it must and will be cut down; ye know not the days of your visitation'. The fervour aroused by Joanna caused one observer of that time to write, 'The lower classes ... began to believe that the seven seals were about to be opened', pp. 421-422.

<sup>91</sup> Revelations 6. 15-17.

<sup>92</sup> Revelations 7. 14-17.

the tree of life will flourish unlike the many rotten trees which need to be axed in the world of Bleak House. With so many symbolic references it is impossible not to associate this image of eternity with characters like Boythorn, Woodcourt and especially Lignum Vitae - wood of life. A pole on the other hand, is a dead tree, used for propping up unsafe houses - hence Skimpole's sterility and his insidious support of the aristocracy.

These references, and those to sheep and goats may seem fanciful, but Dickens was wholly serious. Most of his readers would know that the New Jerusalem was to be founded by the destruction of the vainglorious, worldly city of Babylon, which, for its corruption, was to be struck with plagues and death and mourning and famine. The implication is too obvious to be missed. Bleak House was written between the two devastating cholera outbreaks of 1849 and 1854, a period, as Humphry House tells us, of 'growing complacency' among many of his contemporaries.<sup>93</sup> It was published just after the Great Exhibition of 1851 had trumpeted England's greatness to the whole world.

Early in the novel Gridley declares that no matter how much he is told 'on all hands, it's the system. I mustn't look to individuals', he will insist upon allotting responsibility where it is due.<sup>94</sup> In the last resort he

<sup>93</sup> The Dickens World, second edition. (London: Oxford University Press paperback, 1960), p. 194.

<sup>94</sup> B.H., p. 215.



threatens to 'accuse the individual workers of that system against me, face to face, before the great eternal bar!'<sup>95</sup>

Dickens provides him with precisely that opportunity.

Barbara Hardy calls attention to the 'forensic' language of the omniscient narrator. 'The reader,' she writes, 'is addressed and pressed, often in the manner of a prosecuting counsel, judge or interrogator persuading, accusing, questioning, informing, summing up'.<sup>96</sup> This forensic style, the insistence on a high panoramic vision over human time and space, the cosmic irony, and the present tense narrative, all point to one conclusion - the unnamed, impersonal narrator dramatizes the all-pervasive presence of Providence in the novel.

In Martin Chuzzlewit, Dickens's imaginative flights from the cloying gentility of Tom Pinch and his circle found release in the vitality of storm imagery and working-class characters like Sairey Gamp and Bailey. In David Copperfield, the idealistic aspiration symbolized in the upward flight of Mr Dick's kite includes a strong element of escape from life and its energies, rather than imaginative recreation. Bleak House contains what is surely the most daring imaginative flight of all. Dickens assumes a divine persona and while, like the kite, he thus distances himself from the world, he uses the position not for escape, but for ironic exposure of its human arrogance, stupidity and cruelty. In a passage

<sup>95</sup> B.H., p. 215.

<sup>96</sup> Dickens: the Later Novels, revised edition. (Harlow, Essex, 1977), p. 15.

of quite remarkable writing Dickens makes good his claim to providential creation of life. One by one the stolid portraits of ancient members of the Dedlock family are endowed with warmth and vitality. A dense justice winks, a staring Baronet gets a dimple in the chin, an ancestress of Volumnia shoots out into a halo and becomes a saint, while 'a maid of honour of the Court of Charles the Second, with large round eyes (and other charms to correspond), seems to bathe in glowing water, and it ripples as it glows'.<sup>97</sup> The description performs an act of loving creation, but what a creator gives he can take away, and in the next paragraph these newly resurrected Dedlocks are brought down again 'like age and death'.<sup>98</sup> However, while the impersonal voice which passes sentence upon the Dedlock family is inexorable, it is never harsh - compassion and recognition of their former grace blends in the judgement - 'not the first nor the last of beautiful things that look so near and will so change - into a distant phantom'.<sup>99</sup> Perhaps no-one is better placed than a novelist to understand a deity's relationship to his creatures. Certainly the character of divine Providence created by the voice of the omniscient narrator, thundering in anger over the death of Jo, slyly amused at the dull, gigantic irrelevance of Sir Leicester's pomposity, ominous in its ironic juxtaposing of the Roman with the British Empire, and tender in its

<sup>97</sup> B.H., pp. 563-4.

<sup>98</sup> B.H., p. 564.

<sup>99</sup> B.H., p. 564.

concern for all those who suffer, provides a rich, generous and compassionate contrast to the harsh narrowness of Mrs Snagsby's God.

While the care and pity of the omniscient voice cannot be doubted, neither can its stern insistence upon justice. In Bleak House, Dickens is summoning all of England to the divine bar at the very height of its complacent sense of expanding power and glory as elect nation, chosen by God, to rule much of the world. As the divine over-view allows the narrator to place the little, self-important world of fashion in ironic relation to the immensity of the solar system, so too the whole country, which refuses to care for its own poor, is given ironic focus in the sardonic description 'this boastful island' - the noun contemptuously emphasized in antithesis to its inflated view of historic national destiny.<sup>100</sup> This ironic structural device of placing the great against the small is reversed in the case of Jo. No matter how fashionable the fashionable world, nor how great its systems compared to Jo, his figure is the true measure of its state of grace - inner and outer. This pitiful creature, devoid of possessions, family, knowledge, respect, even name, deliberately reduced to the

<sup>100</sup> B.H., p. 151. According to Bradley, 'there is no doubt that the missionary purpose which the Evangelicals preached for Britain in the early nineteenth century helped to inspire the colonialist and imperialist sentiments associated with the Victorian age', pp. 87-8. As early as 1812 the evangelical Church Missionary Society was suggesting it was the will of Divine Providence 'that to Great Britain may be entrusted the high commission of making known the name of Jehovah to the whole earth'. Quoted in Bradley, p. 90.



barest essentials of his humanity, seemingly unimportant even in fictional terms, is in fact elevated by his creator to the key position in the central complex of meaning in the novel. Alan Woodcourt is near the truth when he thinks, 'how strangely fate has entangled this rough outcast in the web of very different lives', for by their reactions to him, Dickens insists the fate of even the greatest shall be decided in both this world and the next.<sup>101</sup> By a happy choice of words Philip Collins notes, 'Jo is justified rather in the effects he produces than in what he says or does'.<sup>102</sup> It is Dickens's whole intention that Jo, the very 'least of these my brethren', shall justify all the other characters in the novel according to how well they do unto him, quite regardless of any seemingly impersonal systems upon which they seek to shift their responsibility. The 'graceless creature' whom the court of man put aside is here raised in judgement, and his is the broom which will sweep even the most powerful into eternal torment.<sup>103</sup>

In Martin Chuzzlewit, Dickens consciously sets out to attack the vices of selfishness and greed, but already in

101 B.H., p. 647.

102 Dickens and Education, corrected edition (London, 1965), p. 86.

103 The symbolism of Jo's broom may have been more obvious to Dickens's earlier readers; in Lark Rise to Candleford, Flora Thompson describes a fiery, evangelical, travelling preacher who chose for his text, 'I will sweep them off the face of the earth with the besom of destruction'. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1973), p. 218.

that novel the influence of gentility can be felt as a threat to the highest and most vigorous qualities of his art. However, only with Dombey and Son and then David Copperfield does gentility begin to surface as a recognized cause of Dickens's social and artistic anxieties. Although in these middle-period novels, the types of working-class characters most frequently depicted are very different from those of earlier ones, the qualities they represent are still those upheld in opposition to the encroachment of gentility. In Bleak House social concern predominates, and Dickens sets out to explore the evil which he perceives is shaping his society and its attitudes. It is a brilliant achievement. His analysis is subtle and sophisticated, combining psychological, social and historical understanding. Marx wrote:

Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is indeed man's self-consciousness and self-awareness as long as he has not found his feet in the universe. But man is not an abstract being, squatting outside the world. Man is the world of men, the State and society, ... The immediate task is to unmask human alienation in its secular form, now that it has been unmasked in its sacred form. Thus the criticism of heaven transforms itself into the criticism of earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law, and the criticism<sup>104</sup> of theology into the criticism of politics.

It is to the task of demystifying the reified systems controlling and restricting society that Dickens applies himself in Bleak House. He did not have to wait for Marx

<sup>104</sup> Karl Marx: Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy, edited by T.B. Bottomore and Maximilien Rubel (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1963), p. 41.



to show him what was wrong with nineteenth-century England. His perception of the dual nature of alienation, its social and spiritual elements, expressed as early as his characterization of Hugh in Barnaby Rudge gave him the insight needed to understand the importance of gentility as a psychological means of maintaining the privileges of wealth and status in a class-based society. Like Marx, he also perceived that the alienation inflicted upon outcasts from respectability like Jo, is only an extreme form of the alienation of all. Jo's ignorance, lack of autonomy, submissiveness and guilt are shared to a lesser extent by many of the other characters in the novel. Jo is only a particular example of a universal problem. Interestingly, Marx discusses the alienation of the working class using the same contrast between the particular and the general that Dickens plays upon throughout Bleak House. The working class, Marx writes, 'has a universal character because its sufferings are universal, and which does not claim a particular redress because the wrong which is done to it is not a particular wrong, but wrong in general'.<sup>105</sup> The possibilities of redress put forward by Dickens in Bleak House do not begin to measure up to the complexity and penetration of its exposure of social ills. Implicated as they are in the dolls' house ending of Esther's narrative, they exhibit all the soothing, diminutive facility of gentility. Alan Woodcourt is a good man, professional in

<sup>105</sup> Karl Marx: Selected Writings, p. 42.



place of Jarndyce's amateur benevolence, but what is he, or an army like him, against the encroachment of reified systems and the human alienation caused by gentility, so brilliantly depicted in the rest of the novel? Most readers feel the discrepancy between the vision offered by the two narrators. Always the hidden energy in Dickens's art opposes the unreality, the limitation, and the easy answers imposed by gentility. In the marvellous virtuosity and artistic audacity of his impersonation of God this struggle goes on in Bleak House.

PART FOUR

DISCONTENT: THE LAST NOVELS

CHAPTER 7Great Expectations - 'Dream of a Star'

Although the four novels which span the middle of Dickens's career can be typified by the general passivity of the central characters to the circumstances of their lives, the same cannot be said of Dickens's restless exploration, within the texts, of the problems facing his society. His use of fiction to attack and reveal social evils begins with Pickwick in prison and develops from that point into a comprehensive sense of the interrelated structure of modern capitalist society. While he draws attention in each of the early novels to a specific instance of social injustice, the underlying concern in these four middle novels is with the same issue - that of his growing unease with the social phenomenon of gentility. In David Copperfield his disquiet centres largely upon gentility's debilitating effect on imaginative vitality and personal relationships and this leads, in Bleak House, to a brilliant analysis of gentility as a social force, manipulated by those in authority as a psychological weapon of control. In Hard Times, Louisa Bounderby's awakening from a kind of passive apathy into a fully conscious sense of what has been destroyed in her nature and life provides a dramatic analogy to the movement within Dickens's novels as a whole, whereby this underlying personal and social disquiet breaks through to the conscious surface of the fiction.



As a result, Dickens's final novels are characterized by a restless anxiety rather than passivity. This, however, is far removed from the optimistic, questing energy of his early work. Rather, it is expressed in the sense of unease which the central characters feel about their position in the world - a nagging discontent of conscience and social attitude. Jasper, in Edwin Drood, is only the furthest extreme of a series of anti-heroes, beginning with Arthur Clennam, who feel totally at odds with their external circumstances. If the general structural shape of the early novels can be seen as an upward projectory of conquest and the middle ones as a plateau of attainment, then these final ones trace a downward path back to some basic origin in shame.

As before, the working-class characters accord with the emotional mood of the novel. In contrast to the rather passive figures of the middle period, the working-class characters who inhabit the last novels are again full of energy, drawn with compelling imaginative power, and intensely individualized. However, they are very different from their bustling predecessors in the early work. They too tend to be full of discontent and restlessness with their circumstances in life - often violent and disreputable, like David Copperfield's prowling nightmare figures from the working class suddenly brought close and made real. It is not surprising that Dickens, in this period, should again turn to a novel about revolutionary violence - a fear

which is never completely absent from his imagination.

Not that violence is ever wholly evil for Dickens, even in A Tale of Two Cities. Like the passion in his angry women, or like the storm and wind in Martin Chuzzlewit, it can be as much an impulse of life as of death and destruction. It is a manifestation of what he calls the 'principle of life' - that aggressive, pushing vitality which men share with all living things.<sup>1</sup> As such, it is the primal source of energy - whether imaginative, social or physical. Without the destruction of old forms, new growth is stultified and creativity checked. However, Dickens fears that, in the absence of any social control, this fierce life force could gather into a terrifying anarchic impulse for violence and indiscriminate destruction.

The action of gentility upon this primitive source of energy is seen by Dickens to be damaging in many ways. By making men ashamed of their animal needs and natures, and by prohibiting their passions and feelings, gentility alienates them from the natural, physical universe. This leads, inevitably, to a loss of vitality and a drift towards an unreal, death-like existence. The first characters to dramatize this genteel enervation in Dickens's

<sup>1</sup> Curiously, Samuel Bamford uses very similar language to that of Dickens, to describe a striking impression of natural light and wind he witnessed high up on the hills of the Derbyshire -Yorkshire border: 'That is the wind of heaven ... now sweeping over the earth, and visible. It is the great element of vitality - water quickened by fire - the spirit of life!' Autobiography of Samuel Bamford, II, 226.

fiction are Little Nell and Tom Pinch, although only with David Copperfield does any hint of authorial disquiet about the death impulse begin to make itself felt. However, with Pip, in Great Expectations, and the related figures of Magwitch and Orlick, Dickens looks closely and critically at the physical alienation resulting from gentility. In his earlier works, like Martin Chuzzlewit, the only physical passion really considered is anger, but by the final novels Dickens is definitely, although obliquely, suggesting that one of the most powerful and urgent manifestations of men's vital energies is sexual passion. Like all other impulses, this drive can be creative or destructive; it is, writes Dickens in Our Mutual Friend, 'the older pattern into which so many fortunes have been shaped for good and evil'.<sup>2</sup>

Dickens sees gentility as leading towards death in more ways than the stifling of the vital energies in men. The suppression of passion and physical energies demanded by genteel codes of behaviour often acts as a temporary restraint only, producing a damming-up effect, which leads eventually to an explosion of the life force in a revolutionary or murderous pent-up fashion. 'All closely imprisoned forces rend and destroy' he writes in Hard Times,<sup>3</sup> and, in Our Mutual Friend, we watch this process work itself out in the character of Bradley Headstone.

<sup>2</sup> O.M.F., p. 218.

<sup>3</sup> H.T., p. 224.



The only safe check upon the aggressive, thrusting egoism in men is the power of imagination, or fancy, which channels their energies and desires towards positive, creative goals. It is for this reason that Dickens places such stress upon nurturing childhood ideals and fancies, for upon the influence of these depends men's capacity, in later life, to sympathize with their fellow men instead of trampling them down, and to struggle for a more ideal world rather than to destroy for the sake of destruction. Here again, the effect of gentility is pernicious, replacing the variety, colour and joy of life which stimulate fancy, with a dull social conformity and a mechanical, systematized mentality. Louisa Bounderby's anguished questions to her father are also Dickens's to his own society: 'How could you give me life, and take from me all inappreciable things that raise it from the state of conscious death? Where are the graces of my soul? Where are the sentiments of my heart?'<sup>4</sup> Only by such graces and such sentiments, Dickens felt, could the inherent tendency towards violence and anarchy in men be controlled and checked, and their aggressive energy shaped to idealistic ends.

The final form of death induced by gentility is the death of culture, national and individual, and in Our Mutual Friend, it is this which becomes Dickens's central preoccupation. It is an indication of his growing

<sup>4</sup> H.T., p. 216.

pessimism that while the major working-class figures in his early novels are forces in opposition to gentility, they become, in his last two novels, the main means by which he explores its effects - physical alienation in *Pip Gargery* and cultural alienation in *Bradley Headstone*. Even then, it is to the working class that Dickens looks for hope, though minimal, that the blight of gentility may be overcome.

Although this far-reaching and devastating critique of gentility as a social force is only fully formulated by Dickens in his final novels, the insights which lead to it can be observed in his very earliest work. From the beginning he pointed to a connection between the sense of shame imposed by genteel opinion, the consequent self-suppression, and a tendency, in those thus afflicted, towards aggression and violence. This can be traced in an interesting series of working-class characters in his novels, very different from the types discussed in earlier chapters.

In Sketches by Boz, so many of the tales are used to illustrate the way aspirations towards gentility lead to loss of self-respect and humiliation that this almost provides a unifying theme. In sharp contrast to the kind of narrow concern for appearance fostered by social snobbery, is the natural love of display arising from a healthy self-esteem which Dickens depicts in some of the working-class characters in Sketches. 'Such harmless efforts at the grand and magnificent', he notes with pleasure in a group of

London apprentices out in their Sunday finery, concluding his comment with an important psychological observation: 'They are usually on the best terms with themselves, and it follows almost as a matter of course, in good humour with everyone about them'.<sup>5</sup>

By making people, like these apprentices, ashamed of their humble origins, of the way they speak, of their need of physical labour, and their rough hands, gentility destroys such happy self-esteem, and with it the good humour with everyone else. Self-respect leads to respect for others; social discontent and feelings of inadequacy lead to attempts to elevate self by pushing others down. The pressure in nineteenth-century England to engage in the struggle to succeed in the competitive bid for gentility was inescapable. 'In other countries poverty is a misfortune', wrote Bulwer Lytton in 1833, 'with us it is a crime'.<sup>6</sup> Carlyle denominated the Terror of failure the English soul's idea of Hell, and Ruskin at mid-century declared, 'it becomes a veritable shame ... to remain in the state ... born in and everyone thinks it his duty to try to be a gentleman'.<sup>7</sup>

The duty to better oneself by hard work and subservient behaviour to one's social superiors was the form of gentility preached assiduously to the working class, and nowhere more so than in those middle-class institutions for the deserving

<sup>5</sup> S.B., p. 219.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Houghton, p. 185, n.9.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Houghton, p. 191, 187.



poor, charity schools. Philip Collins has noted the 'disastrous gallery of their Old Boys' depicted in Dickens's novels, from Noah Claypole in Oliver Twist to Bitzer in Hard Times.<sup>8</sup> In all these boys self-respect has been replaced by a sense of inner shame at having been recipients of charity, overlaid by a sneaking, servile lip-service to respectability and material success. In many ways, Noah Claypole is a crudely-drawn figure, but he is interesting in containing all the traits Dickens comes to associate with this type of working-class character. He is of a sullen, grudging temper, certainly not in good humour with everyone about him, but rather intent upon doing others down in either a sneaking or a bullying fashion, depending upon how he judges their capacity to retaliate. In this, he is motivated not only by material self-interest, but by the need to inflate his own damaged ego with pleasing evidence of the greater gullibility or weakness of others. His treatment of Oliver Twist is revealing in two ways. His gratification in heaping scorn upon the workhouse boy for his shameful origins exposes his own desire for more status, while the physical bullying of a helpless victim provides a safe outlet for all the suppressed violence accumulated earlier as he endured the jeering mockery of local shop boys who branded him with names like 'leathers' and 'charity'.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Collins, Dickens and Education, p. 77.

<sup>9</sup> O.T., pp. 31-2.

Bill Sikes is presented to readers with no social explanation, as inherently a bad lot, even his legs, we are told authoritatively 'always look in an unfinished and incomplete state without a set of fetters to garnish them'.<sup>10</sup> Despite this, one feels that Dickens's animosity is kindled by Noah rather than Sikes, and indeed in all future novels the working-class villains partake in one way or another of the attributes of Noah Claypole. Bill Sikes is unique in Dickens's fiction in having no social explanation offered for his criminality, apart, of course, from the general brutality of Fagin's underworld.

Like Noah, Rob Toodle, in Dombey and Son, is victimized by the scorn and shame of being stigmatized as a charity boy in the public streets, and this humiliation unites with the hypocritical education he receives to produce the typical sneaking, sulky individual. In addition, Rob has learned better than Noah that the jargon of respectability used against him can be turned to good effect. Whenever he finds himself in a tight spot out comes a self-pitying whimper as to his honourable intentions: 'Oh! Why can't you leave a poor cove alone, Misses Brown, when he's getting an honest livelihood and conducting himself respectable?'<sup>11</sup>

Uriah Heep is the perfected product of this system, mouthing the nauseous clichés of humility to gratify his middle-class hearers with a sense of their own superior

<sup>10</sup> O.T., p. 86.

<sup>11</sup> D.S., pp. 635-6.

gentility, while he hides a brooding class hatred of those who make him ashamed of his humble birth. Uriah has fully internalized the Victorian creed of success and respectability, but his suppression of his real nature to gain those ends is motivated less by material greed than the desire for revenge. Watching him gloat over the humbled Mr Wickfield and learning of the degraded nature of his education and upbringing, David suddenly realizes, 'what a base, unrelenting, and revengeful spirit, must have been engendered by this early and this long suppression'.<sup>12</sup> This spirit soon reveals itself in the attempt to wreck Annie Strong's marriage. 'When I was but a numble clerk, she always looked down upon me', he tells David as sufficient reason for his aggressive malice.<sup>13</sup>

Bitzer, in Hard Times, also aims at social respectability by suppressing his true nature in order to conform to the model of gentility felt suitable to the aspiring lower classes. He is deferential, time-serving and eager to tell the middle class what it wants to hear; in other words, 'an extremely clear-headed, cautious, prudent young man, who was safe to rise in the world'.<sup>14</sup> Dickens sets Bitzer up as the passionless result of Gradgrind's educational system, but his zeal in harrying the family to disaster partakes of at least an element of Uriah's brooding hunger for revenge; that a similarly suppressed streak of

<sup>12</sup> D.C., p. 575.

<sup>13</sup> D.C., p. 608.

<sup>14</sup> H.T., p. 115.



violence inhabits Bitzer, despite his machine-like manner, is suggested by his earlier physical bullying of Sissy Jupe. Although Dickens warned continually in speeches, in journalism, and in novels, with characters like Jo the crossing-sweeper, that lack of education for the children of the poor would lead to violence and revolution, it was the badly educated he really feared, on account of their accumulation of suppressed aggression against society for stigmatizing their lowly origins as shameful.

Although the novels make clear that general social pressures and class-oriented education have produced these monsters, the causes are not allowed to mitigate the culpability. Dickens's hostility to such characters, especially the repulsive Uriah, is felt as an active force. With Bleak House however, Dickens comes to appreciate fully the way gentility is used to destroy self-esteem and inflict a sense of moral shame, and this leads to the more sympathetic treatment of social aspiration in his last two novels. Even before this, his negative delineation of characters like Uriah Heep and Bitzer should not be accounted for wholly as the expression of a middle-class prejudice against those that do not know their place, although an element of this may animate some of his distaste.<sup>15</sup> The main reason lies in Dickens's intuitive grasp of the psychological reality of class as it relates to the struggle for gentility. It

<sup>15</sup> Philip Collins puts forward this view, especially in relation to Bradley Headstone, in Dickens and Education, pp. 152-160.

is the understanding, built upon that early insight into the cause of the London apprentices' genial good humour, of the way feelings of inferiority, engendered by a class-conscious society, lead to the suppression of self in a servile attempt at outer conformity. This outward show of deference hides a festering inner grudge against those who have inflicted the sense of social shame and worthlessness. Richard Hoggart's description of two typical class attitudes is identical to Dickens's delineation of social character:

To these major attitudes towards 'Them' may be added one or two minor but recurrent ones. The 'Orlick' spirit first, the 'I ain't a gentleman, you see' attitude; a dull dog-in-the-manger refusal to accept anything higher than one's own level of response, which throws out decent attempts at using authority and debases them with the rest. Or the peculiarly mean form of trickery which goes with some forms of working-class deference, the kind of obvious 'fiddling' of someone from another class which accompanies an over-readiness to say 'sir', but assumes - in the very obviousness with which it is practised - that it is all a contemptuous game, that one can rely on the middle-class distaste for a scene to allow one to 16 cheat easily.

Later in his book Hoggart describes the scholarship boy 'ashamed of his origins ... a bit superior about much in working-class manners ... He tends to visit his own sense of inadequacy upon the group which fathered him'.<sup>17</sup> This takes us from Bitzer, with his ready scorn of the factory workers who refuse to better themselves by adopting middle-class values as he has done, to Pip Gargery and Bradley Headstone. Indeed Hoggart's chapter heading, 'The Uprooted

<sup>16</sup> Hoggart, p. 75.

<sup>17</sup> Hoggart, p. 301.



and the Anxious' could well refer to these two characters.

First, however, there is another branch of Noah's progeny to be attended to: those who share the discontented disposition without putting in any of the effort of self-suppression needed for successful social climbing, who outwardly accept genteel society's negative estimation of their status and worth and then wallow in their lowest nature with a sullen, envious defiance. Hoggart conveniently calls this the 'Orlick' spirit, but it is seen first in Noah Claypole, and again in Dennis the hangman in Barnaby Rudge, and finally in Riderhood and Silas Wegg in Our Mutual Friend. Like their aspiring brethren, all these working-class characters are filled with discontent and feed their sense of the world's unjust deprivation with an envious grudge against all who are more fortunate. Wegg's spiteful hatred of Boffin is typical of their natures, and while a class society has no monopoly in this, its emphasis on wealth and status invariably exacerbates the causes of their animosity.<sup>18</sup> The speech of these characters is coloured by the same class resentment that characterizes the social climbers, and the similarity between the two types can be noted in the resemblance between Rob Toodle's play upon

<sup>18</sup> In fact, Wegg's hostility is very much class-directed. Towards 'Uncle Parker' he exhibits a fawning servility, feeling his own status elevated by this fictitious contact with the rightful gentry, while he hates Boffin as one properly deserving the scorn he reserves for those of even lower standing than himself, but whom pure chance has elevated into an advantageous social position.



his 'honest livelihood' and Riderhood's reliance upon 'the sweat of his brow', or between Orlick's long-nourished grudge against Pip, and Uriah Heep's against David. In these latter, uneducated men, the violence runs nearer the surface and is less tightly controlled, as evidenced by Wegg's relishing impatience to bring Boffin's nose to the grindstone. As with Uriah, one feels that an envious desire for revenge is as strong a motivation for Wegg as greed. When necessary, however, the violence and envy are hidden beneath a cloak of servile flattery and ostentatious humility. Bitzer and Riderhood rival each other in assiduously knuckling their foreheads to draw attention away from the crafty malice within.

In Civilization and its Discontents, Freud, discussing the connection between aggression, anxiety and guilt, draws attention to the analogy between the process of development in whole societies and in individual human beings:

When, however, we look at the relation between the process of human civilization and the developmental or educative process of individual human beings, we shall conclude without much hesitation that the two are very similar in nature, if not the very same<sup>19</sup> process applied to different kinds of object.

In the early stages of life, claims Freud, an individual who is deprived of a need or desire will feel an impulse of aggression towards those responsible for the deprivation, who, in this early stage of infancy, will almost certainly

<sup>19</sup> Sigmund Freud, Civilization and its Discontents, translated by Joan Riviere, revised and edited by James Strachey (London, 1979), pp. 76-7.

be the child's own loved parents. In turn, this aggressive impulse causes the child to fear that they will punish him and withdraw their love. At a later stage of development, this fear of an external threat is internalized to become the individual's conscience, what Freud terms the super-ego, punishing its possessor with feelings of guilt not just for what it does, but even for thinking the forbidden. Transferred to a cultural context, it is the whole society which deprives its less fortunate members of many of their physical needs and often of the respect and love of their fellow men as well. The reaction is precisely that mixture of aggression and servile fear we find in working-class characters like Orlick, Uriah, Wegg and Riderhood. In others the further development of internalization takes place so that they become self-punishers, tormented by feelings of guilt and shame. Freud explains that his intention in Civilization and its Discontents is to 'represent the sense of guilt as the most important problem in the development of civilization, and to show that the price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt'.<sup>20</sup> As Dickens shows in Bleak House, gentility gains its tremendous influence as an instrument of social conformity and control through its power to inflict a sense of moral shame and guilt in would-be discontents. In Pip, he draws a classic picture of the self-punisher, turning justifiable feelings of

<sup>20</sup> Freud, Civilization and its Discontents, p. 71.

aggression towards those that oppress him into a debilitating sense of self-blame.

Hillis Miller describes Pip as an archetypal Dickens hero on account of his sense of alienation and guilt,<sup>21</sup> but this is failing to appreciate Dickens's development as a novelist: these themes do not dominate until after Bleak House. From the viewpoint of realistic fiction, the surprising fact about *Oliver Twist*, given his early life, is the apparent ease with which he fits into the world of the Brownlows and Maylies. Subsequent heroes, like Nicholas Nickleby, Martin Chuzzlewit, and even David Copperfield, are not shown to be burdened by any sense of guilt or social estrangement. Not so Pip: with him, the most major working-class character in the novels since Sam Weller, Dickens returns for a closer, more inner scrutiny of that sense of shame and alienation born into the consciousness of Jo the crossing-sweeper as he lies dying. This time, its effects are followed from formation in youth through to adult life. Jo only becomes fully conscious of the social and moral separation between himself and others when he is brought into close personal contact with the kindly respectability of John Jarndyce and Esther through the ministrations of Alan Woodcourt. Pip's loss of social innocence is much more traumatic, and more typical of actual experience. He catches

<sup>21</sup> Hillis Miller, pp. 249-251.



the contempt felt by the genteel for the rough like 'an infection' from the undisguised scorn in Estella's manner towards him on his first visit to Satis House.<sup>22</sup> Dickens's notation of the process of alienation is precise and thorough. Estella strikes at Pip's self-pride by seizing upon the typical markers of class in Victorian society. His physical appearance, his speech and his means of support are all targets for her social disgust. His thick boots, revealing the ungracious stringencies imposed by low income, his rough hands, his uneducated language all point to the one shameful fact that he is a 'common labouring-boy'.<sup>23</sup> Dickens's use of this phrase in Estella's first scornful rejection of Pip is not accidental; what Pip is taught to be ashamed of at Satis House is the need to labour with one's hands to live, and the association with direct physical reality this entails. The whole aim of Victorian gentility was to deny any such recognition of man's physicality. Barbara Hardy has pointed out the importance of ceremony and meals in Great Expectations, and Estella's method of feeding Pip drives home the message that he is a lower species of being with no claim to a shared human dignity.<sup>24</sup> Estella hands Pip food 'as insolently' as if he 'were a dog in disgrace'.<sup>25</sup> The insistent ironic play upon

<sup>22</sup> G.E., p. 55.

<sup>23</sup> G.E., p. 55.

<sup>24</sup> Hardy, The Moral Art of Dickens, p. 143.

<sup>25</sup> G.E., p. 57.

the word 'common' throughout the novel brilliantly exploits and draws attention to its ambiguity; the very term used by the respectable to express a distasteful distance is that which should signal the bond between fellow creatures.

As so often, Dickens's journalism provides useful insight into his current artistic preoccupations. It is in 1860, while engaged upon Great Expectations, that he makes his emotional plea in All the Year Round: 'Is it not enough to be fellow-creatures, born yesterday, suffering and striving today, dying tomorrow? By our common humanity, my brothers and sisters, by our common capacities for pain and pleasure, by our common laughter and our common tears ... Surely it is enough to be fellow-creatures'.<sup>26</sup> Pip's reaction to Estella's disdainful rejection of any claims he might make of common fellowship, is typical and revealing. He suppresses his response until he is alone and then finds relief not only in kicking the wall as an outlet for pent-up aggression but in hurting himself. The possibility of rejecting her snobbish judgement with like scorn never enters his head. The fact of his commonness sinks into his consciousness with the weight of truth and he punishes himself for this newly-perceived hatefulness.

Life with Mrs Joe has prepared only too fertile ground for Pip's acceptance of social shame. From his earliest years his sister unremittingly proclaims that his very

<sup>26</sup> 'Two Views of a Cheap Theatre', All the Year Round, 25 February, 1860, reprinted in U.T., p. 36.

existence is a source of offence, as if he 'had insisted on being born in opposition to the dictates of reason, religion and morality', and this sense of gratuitous culpability is pressed home on every possible occasion by deliberately penitential clothing, diet and discipline.<sup>27</sup> Mrs Joe's teaching in this respect is as effective as that of charity schools, and in the same way her repressive hostility to the emergence of any boyish high spirits or joy is increased by a narrow aspiration towards gentility. Far from bringing any sense of grace into their cramped existence, this turns the home into that typical Victorian scene of dismal, well-scoured discomfort, and casts a cloud of disapproval over Joe and his work. Estella's scorn for rough hands should have come as no surprise to Pip, long familiar with his sister's use of her coarse apron as an emblem of the shame and drudgery involved in being married to a blacksmith. Although sanctified by the love of Joe, Pip's young life is shown to be enclosed in an environment as flat, harsh and featureless as the marshes themselves. From Mrs Joe's spiteful, money-grubbing, restricted ambitions, to the low horizon and the graveyard, Pip's young, responsive imagination is offered no point to which it can soar and expand before his visit to Satis House.

The unlovely, front-parlour mentality which Dickens delineates in Mrs Joe, was the typical Victorian working-class response to gentility and lasted long after the demise

<sup>27</sup> G.E., p. 20.



of the Victorians. In This Sporting Life, David Storey gives us Mrs Joe brought up to date, but essentially unchanged, in Mrs Hammond, the hero's landlady and reluctant mistress. The nipped, joyless self-suppression, the elevation of housework into self-righteous justification, and the limited horizons of petty respectability are the same in both women, but Storey is able to present much more openly than Dickens the suppressed sexuality which lies just below the rigidly controlled surface of both characters, and manifests itself in their outbursts of irritable violence. Violence is an ever-present element in Pip's life. No penned-in, farmyard animal could be more subject to physical harassment than he is in the confined household of his sister. 'Bringing-up-by-hand' is interpreted by Mrs Joe as giving her total licence to vent her constant aggression upon young Pip, body and soul. He is quite literally her whipping-boy, and favoured guests to the house are tacitly invited to make free with the convenience. If Pip had been indeed a pig fattened for Christmas he could scarcely have been more abused or allowed less human claim to consideration than he is during the dreadful dinner at the beginning of the novel. To declare that the poor lived like pigs was commonplace among the respectable in Victorian England. Mrs Joe's spotless household is far removed from the slum squalor which elicited such comment, but what Dickens conveys, with sharpness and intensity, through this animal imagery and

undercurrent of violence in the novel, is the way physical harshness oppresses the mind of a child even more than his body. It is of little wonder that Pip later comes to reject a physicality which has always seemed to degrade and humiliate him. Although Pip's early years are spent far from any dangerous city streets, Dickens could not be further from lapsing into pastoral escapism. The physical and psychological details of Pip's home life, depicted with such finely rendered authenticity, reproduce the violence, spiritual and material deprivation, and joylessness of countless 'respectable' Victorian working-class homes.<sup>28</sup>

Against the physical and mental assaults Joe offers but limited protection. Although, like Daniel Peggotty, he has the warm and generous heart which makes for a true home, he has lost Daniel's easy confidence in himself - emasculated by his wife's pretensions and by his own lack of education in a literate world. Dickens undoubtedly means to imply that much of Mrs Joe's bad temper stems from repressed sexuality (another symptom of gentility) which only once in the novel finds a natural outlet. The Sunday peace which Pip says succeeds Joe's fight with Orlick, from

<sup>28</sup> Paul Thompson cites several examples of such families. In one case the mother's harshness towards her children is ascribed directly to her resentment at loss of social status. Her child remembers her frigidity towards her husband, concluding, 'my mother never taught us any affection ... it was always right and wrong and how much work you could do'. Another boy reminisces bitterly, like Pip, upon the genteel hypocrisy of his money-box which was never opened. The Victorian City, I, 66, 72.

which Joe has to carry his wife upstairs while she grasps convulsively at his hair, is surely a post-coital calm. This mastery by her husband's show of brute strength is closely followed by the permanent brutal mastery of her by Orlick, who drops her, as he tells Pip, 'like a bullock'.<sup>29</sup> With the exception of Joe, Dickens depicts every human relationship in this working-class world that Pip inhabits as partaking of the physical brutality and degradation of the farm-yard, and the analogy is emphasized by the continual linkage of Pip and convicts to imagery of animals and butchery. The muddy, social reality from which David Copperfield sought a dream-like escape has become, in Great Expectations, quite literally beastly.

It is hardly surprising that Pip also should wish to escape such an ungracious, fettered domesticity, and Satis House appears to offer a way of life in complete contrast to his degraded animal-like existence. Brutalizing reality is shut out of the old house along with the daylight, and raw emotion is displaced and distanced into mysterious ordered ritual. Human relationships are expressed not by grasping, spiteful hands, but by the discriminating arrangement of rich jewels upon Estella. After the unwelcome, physical, prying closeness of his relations with his sister even Estella's icy aloofness has its attraction, promising the possibility of a dignified, etherealized mode of ultra-civilized communication. Not only time, but all need for

<sup>29</sup> G.E., p. 408.



degrading labour, seems to have dropped away from the house, along with coarse aprons and rough hands and grimy faces; the brewery is disused and crumbling and Pip never sees any working person in the entire place until almost his final visit. Miss Havisham even manages to hide her animal need for food. Beyond all this, in Estella's carefully nurtured beauty he finds something which seems exquisitely fine and ideal for which his imagination has been starved in his sister's home. This, of course, is similar to the attraction of Steerforth for David and Emily, and the language used by Pip to describe his experience is the same as that prevalent in David Copperfield. The influence of Satis House and Estella are compounded in 'the dreamy room' and her beauty raises 'visions' in his youthful fancy; but in Great Expectations the reality behind the dream is not shirked:

Truly it was impossible to dissociate her presence from all those wretched hankerings after money and gentility that had disturbed my boyhood - from all those ill-regulated aspirations that had first made me ashamed of home and Joe. 30

Pip's romantic capitulation to the glamorous charm of Satis House is easily understood in the context of his graceless home-life. However, Dickens also has in mind here, a social analogy similar to that made in David Copperfield. David's implicit rejection of the working-class world of the Peggottys for that of the aristocratic Steerforth has its parallel in the middle-class alignment

with the aristocracy in the Reform Bill of 1832. In a similar way, Pip's transfer of admiration and love from Joe and the forge for the world of Estella reflects the resurgence of aristocratic influence which took place in the real world after the mid-century. In 1857, Cobden declared, 'During my experience the higher classes never stood so high in relative social and political rank, as compared with the other classes, as at present'.<sup>31</sup> This revival of prestige was probably always inevitable given the retention of a notion of gentility at the heart of the bourgeois ideal. Virtues like duty and thrift lack the lasting appeal offered by the romantic myth of an aristocratic beauty. Like Pip, the nation capitulated to the desire for glamour to brighten the drab existence of its own making. Bagehot is astute in his understanding of the attraction offered by the noble ideal to a puritanical and utilitarian society. Although he believed that political power rested with the middle class, the mass of the people deferred not to them but to 'what we may call the theatrical show of society ... a certain pomp of great men; a certain spectacle of beautiful women; a wonderful scene of wealth and enjoyment ... a certain charmed spectacle which imposes on the many, and guides their fancies as it will'.<sup>32</sup> No matter how much moralists like Carlyle or Arnold attacked aristocratic dandyism or philistinism, or put forward

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Best, p. 261.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Best, p. 259.

alternative definitions of gentlemanliness based upon Christian and Hellenic ideals, it was the myth of aristocratic glamour which prevailed, allowing an élite few to exert an influence upon society which far surpassed their real power, or their usefulness to the nation's needs. Meredith, in The Egoist captures superbly the irresistible attraction:

Yet have we dreamed of it as the period when an English cavalier was grace incarnate; far from the boor now hustling us in another sphere; beautifully mannered, every gesture dulcet. . . . There is this dream in the English country; and it must be an aspiration after some form of melodious gentlemanliness which is imagined to have inhabited the island at one 33 time.

This escapist, genteel dream wedded to a realistic, bourgeois respect for money developed, after mid-century, that peculiarly British form of class consciousness which R.H. Tawney describes as, 'the blend of a crude plutocratic reality with the sentimental aroma of an aristocratic legend'.<sup>34</sup> In Victorian England, poverty was regarded as a crime, or at least as an outward sign of moral unworth, but wealth alone was no longer a sufficient sign of grace. It was each man's duty to try also to be a gentleman - a much more elusive ambition, as Bradley Headstone was to discover.

For such an elusive dream Pip abandons the vital, egalitarian comradeship with Joe and the living fire at the forge, just as David Copperfield abandons the gregarious

<sup>33</sup> George Meredith, The Egoist. (Harmonsworth, Middlesex, 1968), p. 44.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in T.B. Bottomore, Classes in Modern Society, second edition (London, 1965), p. 33.



warmth offered by the community in the boat-house at Yarmouth. But as with David, the promised land of gentility to which he aspires has shut out vitality with the sunlight, and its fires are ashy and wasted. Miss Havisham grasps possessively at power with hands every bit as vengeful and spiteful as Mrs Joe's. Pip watches them clutch convulsively at her stick, but fails to read the lesson. Instead of direct physical violence, the rich, like Miss Havisham, use money to impress aggression and frustration upon the world. Estella's childhood, for all its refined seclusion from brutish reality, has been even more enclosed and dehumanizing than Pip's. Pip remains obstinately blind to this corrupt reality of Satis House, as Dickens felt most of his contemporaries were wilfully blind to the corrupt influence of the aristocracy upon English social life and culture. Like them, Pip actively protects his illusion from any contact with the real world. Just as the actuality of the nobility was shielded from public knowledge by a screen of magnificence, so too, Pip spins an imaginative web out of all the traditional paraphernalia of nobility - a coach, waving flags, and feasts upon golden dishes - between the decaying reality of Satis House and his sister's vulgar, plebeian curiosity. Even in adulthood, unhappy and distrustful about his expectations and their source, he continues to adorn and disguise their image with fairy-tale fantasies of enchanted castles and sleeping princesses, all the time dimly aware that it is himself who is bewitched.

As a first step towards leaving behind an unsatisfactory

and sordid physical reality to attain this fairy-tale world of genteel refinement, Pip follows the time-honoured path of self-improvement through education. However, unlike Uriah Heep, Bitzer and Bradley Headstone, he is rescued from the years of slow, destructive self-suppression such a course demands. Strikingly like Dickens himself, Pip is magically released from this bondage by the sudden arrival of his expectations which whirl him swiftly up to the long-desired status.

Once a real London gentleman, the process of Pip's total alienation is quickly completed. He is cut off from nature, from himself and from his fellow men. By accepting gentility's view of physical labour as shameful, and replacing his natural need of food, clothing and shelter with artificial needs which transform these things into status symbols, Pip loses touch with the reality of physical nature of which he is a part, and from whence he derives the essential energy and drive which make him a living, sentient being. In a parallel way, gentility teaches him to feel ashamed of himself by denying value to his origins, family, appearance, speech and future livelihood, and then wealth completes the separation by providing the means of physically cutting the bonds that tie him to this old shameful past self, the forge, the village society, even Joe and Biddy. His old pattern of living, his manner, language and circle of acquaintances are all transformed by the magic touch of wealth. Money and gentility combined are equally effective in creating a barrier between Pip and

his fellow men with their unwelcomed claims of common humanity. Instead of hands with their suggestion of unwanted intimacy, whether benign or terrorizing, money can be used as an intermediary between human relationships. Pip does not physically wash off all human claims, like Jaggers, but, unable to pay money to keep Joe away from London as he would like to do, Pip keeps him at a distance by an intimidating show of genteel splendour. Instead of the penitential visit following this piece of inhospitality, he again avoids personal contact by sending a barrel of oysters.

Although Dickens is at pains to show that Pip's youthful hankerings after money and gentility are stirred to some extent by that common aspiration towards an ideal which he values so highly, he is equally intent on showing that the actuality which Pip believes fulfils these dreams has nothing noble about it at all. Pip accepts the lowest and most negative definition of what makes a gentleman - it is, ironically, the typically working-class one of not working for one's living. As Mrs Pocket's upbringing rigorously protected her from vulgar contamination by any useful arts, so Pip's studies with Mr Pocket are intended to bestow only outward polish, not prepare him for any professional work or useful calling. His life in London is consequently an idle, enervated, unreal existence, lacking even Herbert's attachment to some concrete motivation. Extravagance and waste fail to fill a vacuum of purpose which leaves his life directionless and boring:



We spent as much money as we could, and got as little for it as people could make up their minds to give us. We were always more or less miserable, and most of our acquaintance were in the same condition. There was a gay fiction among us that we were constantly enjoying ourselves, and a skeleton truth that we 35 never did.

The freedom from shame and physical bondage sought in gentility turns into the even more degrading bondage of unpaid debts, bickering friendships and the relentless tyranny of an avenging boy ludicrously decked out in livery to publicize Pip's affectations to the world. In The Egoist a character denounces the folly of producing 'one idle lout the more' in the pretext of making a gentleman: 'They're the national apology for indolence. Training a penniless boy to be one of them is nearly as bad as an education in a thieves' den; he will be just as much at war with society, if not game for the police'.<sup>36</sup> This could well stand as a description of Pip and his associates at the Finches of the Grove.

But Pip is also shown to be at war with himself. His efforts to deny the claims of his past are never completely successful. He lives in 'a state of chronic uneasiness respecting my behaviour to Joe', and at night lies awake thinking 'with a weariness on my spirits, that I should have been happier and better if I had never seen Miss Havisham's face and had risen to manhood content to be partners with Joe in the honest old forge'.<sup>37</sup> Pip's condition resembles

35 G.E., p. 260.

36 The Egoist, pp. 144-5.

37 G.E., p. 258.

that of many of the individuals interviewed by Jackson and Marsdon in their study of the effects of a grammar school education upon the working class. They describe these as inducing 'a malaise', 'related at the deepest levels to a lost feeling for source, means, purpose; a loss heightened by an absence of the sustaining powers of social and family relationships'.<sup>38</sup> Like these later aspiring boys, Pip dimly senses that his ambitions have cut him off from a richer source of life - that 'after all, there was no fire like the forge fire and the kitchen fire at home'.<sup>39</sup> This knowledge of what has been lost in the upward striving is sharpened by an awareness, which gentlemanly lassitude does nothing to suppress, that there is something dishonourable and degrading at the base of his prosperity. The 'gay fiction' of his social existence cannot quite hide the fact, which he finally admits to Herbert: 'I am fit for nothing'.<sup>40</sup> Pip has to discover that his ideal of gentility is more degrading to self-respect than lowly origins, that jewelled rings bought by unearned money are more shameful than grimy hands, and that the freedom of wasted leisure is more enslaving than the need to earn one's bread. Joe's dignified sense of rightness and ease at the forge, Biddy's pride in her hard-won skill as a teacher, and Wemmick's creative pleasure in the products of his craftsmanship are

<sup>38</sup> Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsdon, Education and the Working Class (Harmonsworth, Middlesex, 1966), p. 169.

<sup>39</sup> G.E., p. 258.

<sup>40</sup> G.E., p. 324.

held up as positive contrasts to Pip's sterile ambition to do nothing. 'I am my own engineer, and my own carpenter, and my own plumber, and my own gardener, and my own Jack of all trades', declares Wemmick.<sup>41</sup> Pip is not even his own gentleman - he has not even made himself.

Garret Stewart writes, 'Wemmick's world of literally garrisoned imagination at Walworth Castle is also a pastoral enclave'.<sup>42</sup> If this is so, it is not the pastoral of avoidance which isolates the Peggottys in David Copperfield. The imagination which adorns Wemmick's home has a firm base in the physical realities of life; it offers no escapist fantasy such as Pip's dreams of gentility, but embellishes the objects of daily life with a graceful fancy. The island in Wemmick's miniature lake grows the salad for their tea, and the fowls, rabbits and pig upon the estate are destined for the table. Even the Stinger has the noble practical function of breaking through the Aged's enclosing deafness, bringing him direct sensuous experience of the physical world of sound. Indeed, although Wemmick claims that the drawbridge cuts off communication, his real communication only takes place in the Castle. There, physical gestures, nods, winks and hand-shaking, are vigorously employed to establish direct contact with the old man, in contrast to Wemmick's behaviour beyond, where human relationships are mediated in terms of portable

<sup>41</sup> G.E., p. 196.

<sup>42</sup> Garret Stewart, p. 159.



property, and hands are touched briefly only before death when they can no longer assert worldly or emotional claims.

Reality in its most physically animalistic and shameful aspect does not stay at the edges of Pip's garrisoned dream of genteel security, as it does for David Copperfield; it breaks through his 'stronghold' in the form of Magwitch, and his fantasy world disintegrates, as long ago he had imagined Miss Havisham might do if exposed suddenly, like a body buried in ancient times, to the natural light of day. Magwitch is buried in Pip's alienated past, but there is nothing insubstantial or dream-like about his return. The urgent physicality of his presence repulses and oppresses Pip, who, as usual, tries to ward off the threat with money, but Magwitch burns the banknotes Pip holds between them, and they are left face to face with no ritual of genteel manner or etiquette to disguise or displace the enforced intimacy of their confrontation. What Magwitch makes Pip acknowledge is the vulgar fact, which gentility strives to deny, that man partakes of physical, animal existence. Throughout the novel Dickens's ability to render Magwitch's physical presence palpably through his prose is superb, and he uses the ex-convict's dramatic narrative to insist that man must eat to live, needs shelter and clothing to protect him from the elements rather than to enhance his status, and that, like other animals, he needs the comfort and acceptance of his own kind. It is the denial by genteel society of this

basic, pressingly physical level of need in human life which leads countless numbers like Magwitch in nineteenth-century England to aggression and crime:

'Then they looked at me, and I looked at them, and they measured my head, some on 'em - they had better a measured my stomach - and others on 'em giv me tracts what I couldn't read, and made me speeches what I couldn't unnerstand. They always went on agen me about the Devil. But what the devil was I to do? I must put something into my stomach, mustn't I?' 43

If Magwitch had been able to exist on little hidden snatches of food like Miss Havisham, he would have been less unacceptable to society, but, as he tells Pip, he was always 'a heavy grubber'.<sup>44</sup> In the figure of Magwitch, Dickens gives form to his sense of the uncurbed, passionate, vigorous animal vitality inherent in men which 'no dress could tame'.<sup>45</sup> When they attempt to apply a layer of gentility in the form of powder to his head it has the 'effect of rouge upon the dead; so awful was the manner in which everything in him that it was desirable to repress, started through that thin layer of pretence, and seemed to come blazing out at the crown of his head'.<sup>46</sup> The language Dickens puts into Pip's mouth here ironically reveals more about Pip and Magwitch than Pip realizes. Magwitch refuses to die into a pale, powdered gentility; as the energetic verbs imply, the pulse of natural life within him is too

43 G.E., p. 328.

44 G.E., p. 312.

45 G.E., p. 319.

46 G.E., p. 319.

strong and untamed. Thus too his emotions. The desire for revenge upon Compeyson takes the form of open, outwardly-directed physical anger, quite unlike Uriah Heep's brooding grudge or Miss Havisham's inwardly corrupting ritual of masochistic suffering. With women, as well, his relations have been vigorously natural and he is the real father of Estella, raised as her own child by the debilitated spinster. Estella's white hands, symbol of her separation as a lady from degrading toil, in reality link her physically with her mother and Magwitch's wife, a woman of violent, uncontrolled passions also, whose own hands are scarred by the struggle in which she killed her sexual rival. The hands with which Magwitch grasps at Pip's affection are repulsive to him in their naked appeal for love and tenderness, but their demands cannot be ignored or pushed aside like Joe's for they are accompanied by the most urgent reality of all in physical life - the threat of death.

Pip compares the return of Magwitch into his life to a description, in the Arabian Nights, of a long-maturing fate, but the event really marks the end of his belief in fairy tales and dreams. As the roof of his stronghold drops upon him, he is brought down to earth like Mr Dick's kite. In a variety of ways Great Expectations can be read as a maturer version of David Copperfield. It has the same fable-like form, and, as in the earlier novel, the psychological authenticity of Dickens's presentation obstructs any retreat from the demands of realistic fiction. The



details of Pip's story have the same relevance as those of David's to Dickens's own dramatic upward social flight and to his subsequent feelings of personal discontent and unease. However, Great Expectations reverses many of the structural patterns of the earlier novel and the effect of these changes is always to insist upon an acceptance of physical reality. In David Copperfield the author's and the hero's social and emotional embarrassments are shipped off to the safety of Australia. In the later novel, Pip's social and emotional problem embarrasses him by returning from that country to insist that difficult realities be confronted honestly. In David Copperfield, the hero, as rising star among Dr. Strong's public school pupils, conquers the rough proletarian threat in the shape of the local butcher boy. This defeat is revenged by Pip, the 'prowling boy' who bloodily lays low Herbert Pocket, the 'pale young gentleman'. This small incident is typical of the changed attitude towards class and reality in the latter novel. Herbert disguises the truth of his situation from himself by an elaborately formal ritual which has a sad nobility, but the real fact of his defeat is marked by his 'gore' upon the ground. In David Copperfield reality takes the form of threatening hands reaching out to drag David back from his flight to Dover and gentility into a harsh, degrading working-class world of shame and violence. Pip learns to submit himself to the claims of these outstretched hands from the past and in so doing reconnects himself to the vital physical bonds of human fellowship.

His public association with Magwitch in court marks both his final liberation from the fetters of gentility and an assertion of the higher ideal of common humanity.

Like Blake, Dickens is insisting in Great Expectations, 'Thine own Humanity learn to adore', and the term humanity has to include man's physical nature equally with his spiritual.<sup>47</sup> 'Man is directly a natural being', wrote Marx, 'As a natural being and as a living natural being he is on the one hand furnished with the natural powers of life - he is an active natural being. These forces exist in him as tendencies and abilities - as impulses. On the other hand, as a natural, corporeal, sensuous, objective being he is a suffering, conditioned and limited creature, like animals and plants'.<sup>48</sup> This tension between man as an active, creative force with potential and abilities, and the passive limitations imposed by his physical nature is also at the heart of Dickens's fiction, thematically, structurally and stylistically. In David Copperfield, the natural energy and vitality inherent in all living things are suppressed as forces threatening the need for order and security. David, and Dickens too, perhaps, reject life with its dangerous passions for the 'quiet nook' of a death-like gentility. In his final novels, Dickens returns more positively to that search for an equal balance between man's imaginative ideals and his encompassing physical

<sup>47</sup> 'The Everlasting Gospel', The Complete Writings, p. 750.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in István Mészáros, Marx's Theory of Alienation, fourth edition (London, 1975), p. 168.

reality, between the driving power of energy and aggression he shares with all life and his need for control, order and security first explored in Martin Chuzzlewit.

To treat man as merely a physical animal, as the state does its criminals and social outcasts, degrades them and the whole society. Newgate, close by Smithfield, brings out men 'to be killed in a row', the use of the non-judicial verb pointing to the common butchery.<sup>49</sup> Not very surprisingly, men treated by their fellows as less than human tend to behave accordingly. The convicts Pip sits by on the coach, with their 'coarse mangy ungainly outer surface, as if they were lower animals' respond to the callous contempt of the other passengers by spitting nut shells about as Pip thinks 'I should have liked to do myself, if I had been in their place and so despised'.<sup>50</sup> Orlick does not have their excuse. He degrades himself by refusing, in his grudging way, to make any effort to elevate his own nature above the bestial. His shambling posture, his unenlightened intellect, and his barely controlled ferocity are consciously nourished by his envious hostility towards his fellow men. As always, Dickens is at pains to show that vice is not confined to the working class. Bentley Drummle also exults in his brutal, ignorant, boorish behaviour. Both these men give exact definition to the epithet 'low' used so often in the novel.

49 G.E., p. 156.

50 G.E., pp. 214-5.



On the other hand denial of the animal life within men is seen by Dickens as equally destructive, and is conveyed, as always, by images of coldness, sterility and death. On a frosty night as Pip awaits the return of his sister, who will bring the invitation to 'play' at Satis House, he looks up at the stars and thinks 'how awful it would be for a man to turn his face up to them as he froze to death, and see no help or pity in all the glittering multitude'.<sup>51</sup> His fears foreshadow the cold sense of social distance and hopeless personal inadequacy he experiences looking up at the seemingly unattainable heights of Estella's world of elegance and refinement, but, like the stars, hers is a world long dead. Its aristocratic beauty is only apparent from a distant viewpoint. Looked at more closely as with Pip's first sight of Miss Havisham, the fine show is seen to be tattered, faded and decaying; it retains, however, the power to freeze out life.

Not surprisingly, Pip finds it impossible to play at Satis House. Play is an important concept in Dickens's fiction, encompassing the harmonious fusion of man's animal vitality with his human, imaginative freedom. Sam Weller's leap-frog with life expresses his physical joie de vivre at the same time as it asserts his fancy's conquest of the limitations of physical reality. Under the influence of Satis House, Pip's warm and spontaneous relationship

<sup>51</sup> G.E., p. 46.

<sup>52</sup> G.E., p. 345.

with Joe, which has transcended the mean physical environment of their home, is cooled and wasted into formality. Their 'larks', the word itself wonderfully suggestive of a joyful upward soaring of the spirits, are replaced by the boorish horseplay of the Finches and the dull idleness of Pip's life in London. While such creative spontaneity is killed by the frosty forms of gentility, repressed physical impulses simply turn inward, sour and self-consuming, as in Miss Havisham's tortured rituals of everlasting grief. Pip's self-hatred robs him of confidence, while it enfeebles the outward driving energy needed to put matters right. Sexual repression leads to the nagging shrewishness of Mrs Joe, or the cold disdain of Estella, with her ultimate contempt for her own body.

When Pip finally allows his emotion natural outlet by pouring out his feelings for Estella (thus bringing back a sense of reality and its responsibilities to the shuttered house), he tells her, 'Estella, to the last hour of my life, you cannot choose but remain part of my character, part of the little good in me, part of the evil'.<sup>52</sup> The good that Estella does for Pip is to provide a tangible image of something fine and beautiful which will lift his young imagination beyond the low, domestic horizon and the beastly level in which Orlick rests, inert and dull. She becomes the 'charming spectacle' referred to by Bagehot, or

<sup>52</sup> G.E., p. 345.

Meredith's 'melodious dream'. Where Pip fails is in identifying an ideal with a snobbish rejection of his common humanity. As in the morbidly sentimental short story Dickens wrote of that name, Pip's childish 'dream of a star' becomes a desire to leave behind physical reality altogether, to be taken up to an unreal and unworldly paradise of everlasting genteel beatitude. What he must learn is to redirect his urgent desire for the ideal into an energetic transformation of the real world which circumscribes the only existence possible for man.

As a child, this transforming power is freely his. As he watches Joe repairing the damaged handcuff on Christmas Day, he thinks of the hunted men cowering out on the marshes, and 'the pale afternoon outside almost seemed in my pitying young fancy to have turned pale on their account, poor wretches'.<sup>53</sup> This impulse of sympathetic imagination moves him to treat the convict, brutal and terrifying though he is to a young boy, with an instinctive, gentle courtesy which dignifies their communication without distancing its intimate human contact. Pip's natural ceremony elicits the unfamiliar, long-disused, poignant human response in Magwitch's throat like a piece of machinery stiff and strange with years of neglect. The same pitying outward movement of identifying imagination colours Joe's compassionate words of fellowship to the convict when he is recaptured, and indeed shapes Joe's words and action in the novel from

<sup>53</sup> G.E., p. 29.



first to last. When Magwitch returns, the gentleman his toil has created sees only the repulsive animal-like exterior of the man. As Pip's sense of the convict's inner capacity for human love and loyalty and suffering deepens so his 'pitying fancy' is rekindled, and he commits himself freely as to a fellow human creature. As before, human regard softens the greedy possessiveness of Magwitch's claims. Both of them are ennobled by the growth of consideration, generosity and finally affection in their relationship. These qualities lift life above the merely animal and refine all people with natural dignity and nobility. They have their source in a balanced reciprocity between man's animal and spiritual capacities. Self-respect, which allows man to respond to man as his equal without grudge or disdain, is founded upon the animal vitality which made the London apprentices Dickens watched in such good humour with everyone about them. It is lifted above the merely animal by man's creative, imaginative capacity to adorn with grace and glamour, not just the lives of an élite few, but, like Wemmick or Joe, the people and objects of everyday life. Furthermore, this imaginative capacity, in direct contrast to gentility, sees beyond the outward appearance of things, recognizing a common bond in man's vulnerability to physical necessity, asserting by an outgoing, identifying movement of pitying fancy, their oneness in suffering and animal needs. These are the qualities which Pip comes to share with Sam Weller, whose high spirits do not prevent, but rather increase,

his sympathy for 'the worn-out, starving, houseless creeturs' that seek shelter in the arches of Waterloo Bridge.<sup>54</sup> The fusion of physical energy, transcending imagination, and pitying fancy, is Dickens's own, the basis of all his highest art. The enemy of these qualities is gentility in whatever form, and for this reason the forces he summons to fight it back are to be found still among his working-class characters.

If there is a weakness in this fine novel, it can be blamed, like almost all the flaws in Dickens's work, upon his own deference to gentility. It is difficult not to agree with Orwell that Dickens cannot adequately describe work. In Great Expectations Joe's craft is never fully realized. There is little sense of that rewarding fulfilment which comes from the exercise of hard-won skills - of muscles, eyes and brain moving with the creative co-ordination of long practice. Wemmick's handicraft also remains at a rather whimsical level. There is nothing here to compare with the wonderful emotive and sensual power of Zola's description of an iron-worker in L'Assommoir, for example, and this leaves part of the positive contrast which opposes the genteel ideal unsatisfactorily insubstantial. In a similar way, Dickens's hesitancy in dealing explicitly with much of the animal in human behaviour keeps this aspect of the novel more vague than is perhaps desirable, although the passionate figure of Magwitch and Mrs Joe, with her irritable, frustrated energy, work at deeper

<sup>54</sup> P.P., p. 210.

levels to suggest the powerful forces of physical sexuality and aggression. Indeed, it seems unnecessarily carping to object to any detail of Great Expectations which is surely Dickens's most perfect novel. There are no hidden contradictions or ambiguities within its text, no underlying rejection or subversion of its surface pattern of meaning. In it, imagery, poetry, language, theme and story all flow in the same direction, enriching each other, to produce the highest art and a wise and compassionate vision of human existence - its limitations and its possibilities for freedom.



## CHAPTER 8

Our Mutual Friend - Down to Earth

'I can be!' returned Bradley, in a desperate, clenched voice. 'I am resolved to be. I'll hold you living <sup>1</sup> and I'll hold you dead. Come down!'

In Great Expectations, Pip escapes the bondage of gentility by freely embracing one of the most wretched of his fellow men. In thus accepting the necessity imposed by his human and physical nature, he gains the liberation he had vainly sought in social flight. Bradley Headstone's embrace of Rogue Riderhood is also a recognition and acceptance of fellowship and origin, the nature and necessity of which are marked by the scum and ooze in which the two men lie, and by Bradley's relentless grip on Riderhood, - 'he was girdled still with Bradley's iron ring, and the rivets of the iron ring held tight'.<sup>2</sup> The street urchin's leap-frog with life ends with this despairing leap into death. It is Bradley Headstone's first and last free act - the only liberation possible from the enclosing cul-de-sac that his life becomes.

The seductive promise of such a final escape casts its fascination over much of this last novel. Phrases from the Christian sacraments of baptism and burial dapple the text, reflecting the alternate impulses towards regeneration, life, and struggle or the oblivion, peace, and rest of easeful death,

<sup>1</sup> O.M.F., p. 802.

<sup>2</sup> O.M.F., p. 802.

which provide the novel with its underlying structure. The river encompasses both these impulses in a natural harmony. 'As if it wasn't your living! As if it wasn't meat and drink to you!', Gaffer insists quite truthfully to Lizzie as he fishes for dead men in its currents; but in due course the river reclaims what it gives, and Gaffer too is 'baptised unto Death'.<sup>3</sup> The upward, thrusting energy of life is operative in his son, Charlie Hexam, accounting for that look of 'awakened curiosity' with which he studies the books in Veneering's library.<sup>4</sup> Charlie is intent upon escaping from the bondage and mental oblivion of poverty and ignorance, and perhaps this is the reason why the raising of Lazarus from the dead and the Israelites' escape from Egyptian slavery across the Red Sea come easily to his mind when he replies to Mortimer Lightwood. The journey ahead of him to the ease of economic security and social respectability also promises to be long and arduous, for he is as yet 'a curious mixture of uncompleted savagery and uncompleted civilisation'.<sup>5</sup> It is unlikely that the meagre education he has so far received allows him to appreciate the significance of the picture he also contemplates while he waits, but it is not by chance that Dickens refers to it. The dual impulsion which sets Chaucer's pilgrims on their journey to Canterbury is that universal surge of physical energy which revitalizes all natural things, men, birds and flowers, after the inertia

<sup>3</sup> O.M.F., pp. 3, 174.

<sup>4</sup> O.M.F., p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> O.M.F., p. 18.

and death of the winter season, but it is also the desire for escape from the troubles and suffering of material life into the peace of spiritual aspiration. This is a rising, not only of sap in the veins, but of the mind or imagination towards an ideal, and, despite the coarse physical vigour of life displayed along the way, the goal of the pilgrimage is apotheosis.

Charlie's schoolteacher, Bradley Headstone, is ahead of his pupil upon their social pilgrimage, having already attained the promised land of educated respectability, being a 'thoroughly decent young man of six-and-twenty' and a 'highly certificated stipendiary schoolmaster'.<sup>6</sup> However, this raising up, unlike that of Lazarus, has demanded suppression rather than increase of life; Bradley's strict conformity to every dictate in the Victorian canon of gentility being publicly proclaimed by his monotonously 'decent' appearance - coat, waistcoat, shirt, tie, pantaloons and watch, all devoid of individuality and colour. Neither has his success been blessed by ease or restfulness. His countenance has a look of care and his manner is suspicious:

There was a kind of settled trouble in the face. It was the face belonging to a naturally slow or inattentive intellect that had toiled hard to get what it had won, and that had to hold it now that it was gotten. He always seemed to be uneasy lest anything should be missing from his mental warehouse and taking stock to <sup>7</sup> assure himself.

Philip Collins is hardly fair when he asserts that Dickens

<sup>6</sup> O.M.F., pp. 216-217.

<sup>7</sup> O.M.F., p. 217.



adopts an external, middle-class, unsympathetic attitude towards Bradley Headstone.<sup>8</sup> Richard Hoggart whose viewpoint certainly cannot be considered either external or unsympathetic describes exactly the sort of aspiring working-class type Dickens depicts in Bradley Headstone. The kind of boy Hoggart refers to is far from unusual and may well form the majority of those who aspire to climb the social ladder by educational achievement. He is one of the 'moderately endowed', one of 'those who are self-conscious and yet not self-aware in any full sense, who are as a result uncertain, dissatisfied, and gnawed by self-doubt'.<sup>9</sup> He is the kind of individual, Hoggart continues, who will 'probably push himself harder than he should ... He tends to overstress the importance of examinations, of the piling up of knowledge and of received opinions. He discovers a technique of apparent learning, of the acquiring of facts rather than of the handling and use of facts'.<sup>10</sup> Such a boy tends to make a father figure of his form-master and has something of the 'blinkered pony' about him, having often been trained 'by those who have been through the same regimen, who are hardly unblinkered themselves, and who praise him in the degree to which he takes comfortably to their blinkers'.<sup>11</sup> The whole of Hoggart's analysis of this anxious, clouded mentality brings to mind that painful scene where Charlie Hexham and Bradley Headstone confront,

<sup>8</sup> Collins, Dickens and Education, p. 153.

<sup>9</sup> Hoggart, p. 293.

<sup>10</sup> Hoggart, p. 297.

<sup>11</sup> Hoggart, p. 297.

in their narrow, priggish earnestness, the smooth surface of Eugene Wrayburn's cynical, upper-class evasion. Charlie's assertive boast that his teacher is the 'most competent authority, as his certificates would easily prove, that could be produced' is pathetic as well as embarrassingly naive, and yet Headstone, used only 'to the little audience of a school, and unused to the larger ways of men, shows a kind of exultation in it'.<sup>12</sup>

Later he uses these same vaunted qualifications in an attempt to win Lizzie's acceptance of him, as if he had no other personality or individuality but that of the teacher, produced 'all according to pattern and all engendered in the light of the latest Gospel according to Monotony'.<sup>13</sup> In Great Expectations, Pip also is alienated from his own nature in the pursuit of gentility, but he is able to find his way back to a sense of reality through the saving grace of his pitying fancy. Dickens allows no such escape route for Bradley Headstone; any imaginative capacity he may have had has been deadened by the long years of self-suppression demanded by his grimly utilitarian education. Knowledge is pursued by him not for delight, not as an end in itself, but as a means of gaining certificates, and any particle not required for that relentlessly mechanical purpose has no place in his mind, which from his childhood up has been 'a place of mechanical stowage'.<sup>14</sup> Again, Hoggart is

<sup>12</sup> O.M.F., pp. 289-290.

<sup>13</sup> O.M.F., p. 218.

<sup>14</sup> O.M.F., p. 217.

perceptive; education for such a constricted purpose does not encourage the growth of a 'freely ranging mind, the bold flying of mental kites' and worse, it crushes any inherent resilience and vitality.<sup>15</sup> 'In an earlier generation', he writes, 'as one of the quicker-witted persons born into the working-classes, he would in all probability have had those wits developed in the jungle of the slums, where wit had to ally itself to energy and initiative'.<sup>16</sup> Many generations earlier than Hoggart, Dickens foresees exactly this threat to the street wit and resilience of the working class which he had portrayed with such energetic delight in his earliest novels. All work and no play makes Bradley Headstone very dull indeed, offering little hope that in his schoolmaster's role he will exert any regenerating influence upon British culture and society, but rather will be likely to spread ever wider the mechanical, lifeless conformity, which, Dickens believed, was squeezing out all spontaneity, creativity and delight from national life. It is a sad irony that the impulse of life upwards should be perverted into such a cultural blind alley. A working-class boy quoted in the study by Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsdon (which confirms many of Hoggart's insights) sums up the utilitarian hostility to vitality and creative thinking still surviving in much of our education system:

<sup>15</sup> Hoggart, p. 297.

<sup>16</sup> Hoggart, p. 298.



Christ, no, I didn't like Marburton College. Too fast, they just got me there and they crammed my nut from the moment I arrived. That school doesn't turn out human beings, it turns out people to read and write, that's all. Look at the facts they rammed into me. ... You don't play out any more, and you don't see anybody except on a Friday night. ... Christ kid, they don't believe in leisure. Leisure means laziness for them ... But leisure, that's what you need in growing up and, Christ, you don't have any leisure. 17

Charlie Hexam and Bradley Headstone 'don't play out any more' and as a result they lose that part of their humanity which is creative, spontaneous and sympathetically imaginative. Dickens would have loved the quotation above, but his schoolmaster has long since lost, or never acquired, the self-confident awareness which engenders its defiant spirit.

So much is lost, spiritually and culturally, for such little social gain; for despite Headstone's continual assertions about his qualifications and status he is constantly a prey to self-doubt and anxiety lest the respect he feels he has deserved is not forthcoming. After all the years of drudgery and self-suppression, he neither feels nor is felt to be 'a gentleman'. The Smilesian myth turns out, certainly after the mid-century, to be a fraud; hard work and self-help do not confer gentility - only a public school education can do that. Geoffrey Best writes that '"Education" became, between the forties and eighties, a trump card in this great class competition'.<sup>18</sup> In the 1830's, Best considers, the kind of school men attended was of little consequence socially. This was changing rapidly during the

17 Quoted in Jackson and Marsden, p. 119.

18 Best, p. 170.

forties and fifties until, by the seventies and eighties, a public school education had become more influential than university. 'By the eighties, the uncertainty which had hung over the use of the word gentleman during our period had given way to this certainty at least, that anyone was a gentleman who had been to a public school or who successfully concealed that he hadn't'.<sup>19</sup> With the public school system established, gentility becomes institutionalized. In his dealings with Headstone, Eugene Wrayburn deliberately exploits the easy confidence and class superiority conferred by his public school education to ensure that the teacher is made acutely aware that he is able to conceal nothing of his inferior learning and upbringing. His look, with its 'cold disdain', implies that Bradley is a 'creature of no worth', and the unyielding insistence upon the utilitarian title 'Schoolmaster' denies him interest or dignity as an individual being beyond the merely functional role of his job.<sup>20</sup> This is a return to the class struggle first seen between Steerforth and Ham, intensified by Headstone's bitter awareness that all his efforts at self-improvement only put him at a further disadvantage before his rival. Education has made him more, not less, ungainly: 'Oh, what a misfortune is mine ... that I cannot so control myself as to appear a stronger creature than this, when a man who has not felt in all his life what I have felt in a day can so

<sup>19</sup> Best, pp. 276-7.

<sup>20</sup> O.M.F., p. 288.

command himself!'<sup>21</sup> Ham escapes this dreadful kind of humiliation because he never attempts to challenge Steerforth on his own ground. Gentility has promised Bradley Headstone equality only insidiously to deny him final recognition. As Ruskin noted, nearly all Victorians came to feel it a solemn duty to strive to become gentlemen, but only an elect would be so called. The more Headstone tries to assert his claim to worth and respect the more horribly he condemns himself as embarrassingly vulgar and ungenteel. The raw nerve of pain which comes through the confrontation scene suggests that Dickens is writing here out of personal experience. Forster tells us that Dickens's origins caused him to be often 'uneasy, shrinking, and over-sensitive' in society, with the attendant reaction to this of seeming at times 'stern', full of the 'cold isolation of self-reliance'.<sup>22</sup> This perceptive description of Dickens's character is strikingly similar to the account Dickens gives in Our Mutual Friend, of Headstone's social sensitivity: 'Regarding that origin of his, he was proud, moody and sullen, desiring it to be forgotten. And few people knew of it'.<sup>23</sup> It seems inevitable that Dickens must often have been aware of a snobbish disdain directed at him by the 'well-bred' of his society. Only a year after his death, The Times noted complacently that he was, 'often vulgar in manners and dress ... ill at ease in his intercourse with gentlemen'.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> O.M.F., p. 292.

<sup>22</sup> Forster, I, 34-5.

<sup>23</sup> O.M.F., p. 218.

<sup>24</sup> Dickens and his Readers, p. 162.



In the individual conflict between Wrayburn and Headstone, Dickens depicts the most savage class hatred to be found in all his fiction, and he rightly shows that its particular bitterness is the direct result of a gentility which denies to some men their legitimate claims to dignity and worth, instilling them with a sense of hopeless inadequacy. Throughout Our Mutual Friend, Dickens uses individual characters in this way to fulfil representative social roles; some like Boots and Brewer having no other function at all, but even those who are depicted realistically have to be understood in this almost symbolic way - like Veneering, they are 'representative' men.<sup>25</sup> Through Headstone, Dickens explores imaginatively the possible threat of class violence posed by men who are motivated by a dangerous mixture of self-contempt and hatred of those who have engendered it. Other social discontents in his fiction, like Noah Claypole, Uriah Heep, Riderhood and Wegg, find an outlet for feelings of social aggression in criminal activities, but their actions are too tempered by a servile sense of self-preservation ever to form a real threat to society in general. Other potential discontents, like Pip, or Jo the crossing-sweeper, internalize their aggression at injustice, transforming it into a sense of guilt which leaves them too timid and insecure to assert any dangerous claims. This, as Dickens show in Bleak House, is the way gentility is used as a means of social control, emasculating possible aggression among the working class by

<sup>25</sup> O.M.F., p. 244.

robbing them of self-respect. In case this is still not understood by his readers, Dickens takes care, in Our Mutual Friend, to show the process at work in the relationship between the Lammles. At the end of their honeymoon, Alfred conceives 'the purpose of subduing his dear wife Mrs Alfred Lammle, by at once divesting her of any lingering reality or pretence of self-respect'.<sup>26</sup> However, as with Mrs Lammle and with Headstone, this destruction of wholesome pride can also inspire a recklessness as to consequences in their own lives, and a brooding hatred of those who make them hate themselves. In such cases, the subduing only suppresses aggression, it does not destroy it or turn it inwards. 'Impeded aggressiveness', writes Freud, 'seems to involve a grave injury. It really seems as though it is necessary for us to destroy some other thing or person in order not to destroy ourselves, in order to guard against the impulsion to self-destruction'.<sup>27</sup> After his experience of Eugene Wrayburn's annihilating contempt, Headstone becomes obsessive in his need to feed his class hatred of the other by continually exposing himself to further insult. In order to retain any sense of his own worth, he must constantly prove that Wrayburn is the inhuman demon his mind needs. When he is rejected by Lizzie, his wounded pride flies at once to the protection of hatred. It is not his own unworthiness that

<sup>26</sup> O.M.F., p. 127.

<sup>27</sup> Sigmund Freud, New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, translated and edited by James Strachey (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1973), p. 139.

is his downfall, but the villainy of his rival. In a very similar way, all class hatred is fed by daily contact with the scorn of gentility.

Bradley Headstone bears such a close resemblance to many aspects of the nihilistic anarchist called the Professor in Joseph Conrad's The Secret Agent (1907), that it seems possible he was indeed part of the inspiration for that character. 'But I don't play,' the Professor boasts, 'I work fourteen hours a day, and go hungry sometimes'.<sup>28</sup> His room reinforces this claim of self-suppression, being 'clean, respectable and poor with that poverty suggesting starvation of every human need except mere bread'.<sup>29</sup> Conrad also sees a connection between moral evangelicalism and genteel ambitions. The Professor's father, we learn, was a preacher in some 'rigid Christian sect - a man supremely confident in the privileges of his righteousness'.<sup>30</sup> In the son this moral faith becomes a 'frenzied puritanism of ambition'; 'his struggles, his privations, his hard work to raise himself in the social scale, had filled him with such an exalted conviction of his merits that it was extremely difficult for the world to treat him with justice'.<sup>31</sup> The Professor is the only one of all the plotters and revolutionaries in the novel that Conrad takes seriously and depicts as posing a real threat to society. Unlike his comrades, but very like

<sup>28</sup> The Secret Agent (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1963), p.65.

<sup>29</sup> The Secret Agent, p. 242.

<sup>30</sup> The Secret Agent, p. 73.

<sup>31</sup> The Secret Agent, pp. 73 and 69.



Bradley Headstone, neither self-preservation nor self-indulgence has any hold upon him; the world's contempt for his merits and the suppression of all his human and physical appetites' have rendered life worthless.

Of course, Dickens does not explicitly depict Headstone as a deliberate revolutionary, as Conrad does the Professor, but the attempted murder of Wrayburn does have the same kind of representative function within the novel as that of the marriage between classes at the end. Bradley, especially at first, is shown to be intent upon acceptance by genteel society and he rigidly conforms to all its values - as indeed Conrad stresses that the Professor has done. It is for this reason that the rage felt by Headstone is not seen by Dickens in the same positive light as that of his angry women - like Jenny Wren, for example. If Dickens is exploring through his schoolteacher character, albeit very tentatively indeed, the possibility of a regeneration of society to be brought about through class revolution by disaffected men like Headstone, then his conclusions are firmly negative. In Bradley Headstone, and perhaps earlier in Uriah Heep, he certainly creates a convincing psychological study of the kind of obsessive and unyielding temperament needed to carry through a real social revolution, as opposed to the casual, good-humoured anarchy of the urchins, or the spontaneous explosions of passion in his shrewish women. However, he shows, equally clearly, that no spiritual or cultural rebirth can be achieved through such an agency, who, inevitably, has suppressed the humanizing imagination necessary to soften

and brighten the conformist, authoritarian tendency of his mental outlook. As either an agent of class self-improvement through education, or of violent class revolution as a reaction to frustrated idealism, poor Bradley Headstone spells sterility and death. In the light of historical experience from Dickens's day to our own only the most sentimental or illusioned would deny that this insight has often been proved sadly right. Yet despite the full realisation of the potential threat to civilization by men like Bradley Headstone, Dickens, unlike Conrad, never withdraws his sympathy. The imaginative insight with which he presents the man's inner suffering is a practical case study of the power of his own authorial pitying fancy which rises above the prejudices of his unengaged social reflexes with their authoritarian hostility towards criminals and troublemakers. This sympathetic identification with his characters in his novelist's imagination is the cause of the discrepancy, often noted, between his other public statements on social issues and their fictional representation, and a reason why it can be misleading to seek to interpret his novels in the light of his journalism, speeches or letters.<sup>32</sup>

The bitter irony of Bradley Headstone's and Charlie

32

Philip Collins discusses this question of discrepancy in Dickens, but, in the last resort, he appears to place more emphasis on the views expressed in the extra-literary sources, which may be correct if one is concerned with Dickens the man, rather than the novels or the novelist. Dickens and Crime, second edition (London, 1964), pp. 89-93.

Hexam's struggles to raise themselves in the scale of society is the unworthiness of that society to their aspiration. They merely exchange the limitations of ignorance for the dead culture imposed by Podsnappery. If Dickens shows some thoroughly nasty working-class characters in this last novel, his hostility towards them seldom reaches the proportions of the hatred which animates his presentation of 'Society' in the form of Lady Tippins, the Veneerings, the Podsnaps and the Lammles. Not even Pope could draw a more venomous picture than Dickens does of the 'certain yellow play in Lady Tippins' throat, like the legs of scratching poultry'.<sup>33</sup> This sense of barely controlled physical and moral disgust is present in all the passages describing these people. Their world is conveyed as one of brittle artificiality and total cultural sterility. The controlling imagery is more arid than Boffin's dust-heaps. London is compared to a sawpit and a prison: 'The closed warehouses and offices have an air of death about them, and the national dread of colour has an air of mourning ... The set of humanity outward from the City is as a set of prisoners departing from gaol'.<sup>34</sup> On his release from this city prison, Reginald Wilfer encounters only the 'suburban Sahara' of Holloway where his domestic life, shrouded in gloomy and majestic gentility, moves to the Dead March in Saul.<sup>35</sup> Silas Wegg, already partly wooden,

<sup>33</sup> O.M.F., p. 12.

<sup>34</sup> O.M.F., p. 393.

<sup>35</sup> O.M.F., p. 33.



'dry as the Desert', sitting at his dusty easterly corner seems to epitomize the whole nature of this vision of national death.<sup>36</sup> The prolific, if weedy, garden of Chuzzlewit has become, by this last novel, a desert inhabited largely by such evil birds of prey.

The arts in the hands of those like Wegg are degraded into merely commercial transactions, joyless and mechanical, while their content is shrivelled by Podsnappian conformity to a lifeless, repetitive pattern from which all reality, vigour, and adventurous thought are eliminated - absolutely no bold flying of mental kites anywhere allowed. Pleasure in the refining qualities of beauty, colour and form has given way to the showy vulgarity of Veneering's silver camels or the ugliness of Podsnap's ponderous household goods, chosen solely to overwhelm visitors with a sense of their owner's importance. Government partakes of the same commercial spirit; parliamentary seats being delivered to those with sufficient cash and prepared to put on the necessary show. The exuberant, posturing bonhomie, however false, of a Pecksniff or a Montague Tigg, seems infinitely less menacing than the boorish, inarticulate spitefulness of Fledgeby and the chilling predations of the Lammles.

The marriage between Sophronia and Alfred sets the pattern for human relationships in the society of Our Mutual Friend - deceptive, avaricious and vicious. The constant talk of oldest and dearest friends, assertions of emotional

<sup>36</sup> O.M.F., p. 45.

attachment and of undying fidelity echo brittly around dinner tables void of any fellowship or human sympathy. In this starkly individualistic society each person is isolated, wary and predatory, yet bound to others in mutual self-interest and suspicious hostility, as Mr and Mrs Lammle walking like 'two cheats who were linked together by concealed handcuffs ... haggardly weary of one another, of themselves, and of all this world'.<sup>37</sup>

A central image of the novel, which holds together the interplaying ideas of aridity, death and bondage with those of regeneration, new life and escape, is Egypt and the release of the Israelites from captivity and toil - the same image which underlies David Copperfield's flight from London to Dover and a new, genteel life. Now its meaning has been reversed and extended; it is escape from the spiritual desert of genteel society which is sought, as well as deliverance from the physical and mental bondage which characterises the lowest life among the riverside streets. Not that the legitimacy of this latter desire is ever denied in the novel. Despite Dickens's harsh verdict upon the results of Charlie Hexam's and Bradley Headstone's efforts to escape, he is grimly realistic as to the physical and mental damage inflicted by the conditions of working-class life manifested, as they are, in Jenny Wren's crippled and stunted frame. After long years of toil in the 'one dull enclosure' of Harmony Jail, the Boffins find a child-like delight in the 'variety

<sup>37</sup> O.M.F., p. 650.

and fancy and beauty' on display in shop windows and Dickens underwrites their impulse towards an easier, more colourful life.<sup>38</sup> Words like 'child's delight', 'fancy' and 'enjoyment' are never used by him without the most serious underlying meaning. Despite the critique of commercial values shaping society in Our Mutual Friend, Bella Wilfer's outbursts against poverty and its consequences have the ring of truth. In so far as being poor checks the natural impulse of life towards beauty and colour, poverty is offensive and degrading and beastly to Dickens, not an ennobling stimulant towards unworldly virtue.

Poverty is one form of bondage, ignorance is another. Just as the desire for brightness is a natural part of being fully alive, so equally is the need of the imagination to stretch out towards more distant, expansive horizons than those circumscribed by the here and now of a narrow daily life. This is the drive towards education in its highest sense - the cause of Mr Boffin's excitement that through Wegg 'Print is now opening ahead'.<sup>39</sup> Lizzie Hexam, without books, reads the glow of the fire, 'where her first fancies had been nursed, and her first escape made from the grim life out of which she had plucked her brother'.<sup>40</sup> Despite his negative portrayal of the effects of a utilitarian schooling, Dickens shows that lack of education robs those who are so handicapped of autonomy and self-respect. Wegg's cunning use

<sup>38</sup> O.M.F., p. 466.

<sup>39</sup> O.M.F., p. 53.

<sup>40</sup> O.M.F., p. 526.



of gentility to quell Boffin by making him feel uncomfortably at fault for mentioning the unmentionable in front of Mrs Boffin is a perfect example of the way social manners and genteel taboos are always used to put the uneducated at an inhibiting disadvantage.<sup>41</sup> Ignorance allows Boffin to be exploited by Wegg, and Betty Higden to be terrorized by Riderhood because their illiteracy makes it impossible for either of them to challenge the false claims of these men. On a national level exactly the same process allows Podsnap to override any well-intentioned objections to his absurd and callous chauvinism. Ignorance is not solely a bondage on the poor; Dickens shows that it shackles the whole nation. Rokesmith, who works assiduously to gain 'the power conferred by knowledge' to protect Mr Boffin from those hoping to prey on his ignorance, speaks several European languages.<sup>42</sup> So too did Dickens, who, on his foreign travels was frequently incensed by the narrow insularity and presumptuous Podsnappish ignorance of his fellow Englishmen.<sup>43</sup>

This is indeed the crux of the matter. Working-class poverty, ignorance and brutality are seen, in Our Mutual Friend, as physical and spiritual bonds from which escape is to be as urgently desired as in David Copperfield or Great Expectations. The dilemma is in which direction such an escape is to be sought. The world of Podsnap and Veneering

41 O.M.F., p. 59.

42 O.M.F., p. 193.

43 For an excellent account of Podsnap at large, see Dickens's letter to Count D'Orsay, 5 August, 1846, in

is not a delusive aristocratic dream which will disintegrate like Miss Havisham and Satis House at the touch of reality. They are reality, the British nation, an unholy alliance of worn-out aristocracy, solid middle-class pomposity and shady new wealth. 'Veneering' writes Dickens, 'is a "representative man" - which cannot in these times be doubted'.<sup>44</sup> Their world is the promised land of genteel society sought by the aspiring working class, but for those like Charlie Hexam and Bradley Headstone, and Dickens too, who struggle to make that upward journey from the constraints of their enclosing environment, the end of their pilgrimage is an equally constricting mental conformity and spiritual torpor, not life, or widened horizons, or energetic freedom. Gentility dictates that the Boffins exchange the home their fancy has transformed from a jail to a bower for a cold, loveless house with 'two iron extinguishers before the main door - which seemed to request all lively visitors to have the kindness to put themselves out, before entering'.<sup>45</sup> Such iron extinguishers are on guard before all the main doors to gentility. The all-pervasive, national nature of this rule of dullness and death makes any solution difficult to conceive. For the first time, Dickens seems seriously to doubt the efficacy of those principles to which in the past he has looked with hope. Eugene Wrayburn's diatribe against the bees and their ethic of hard work, like Bella's complaint against poverty, is not meant to be taken wholly unqualified.

<sup>44</sup> O.M.F., p. 244.

<sup>45</sup> O.M.F., p. 45.

However, Dickens has come to see that this revered cornerstone of Victorian morality is also a cornerstone of Podsnappery. Of course, he had always defended the need for wholesome leisure passionately, but, nevertheless, hard work and earnest application to duty were still seen as the key to success even in Great Expectations, where Pip vindicates himself in helping Herbert build up a moderate prosperity. This kind of striving for self-improvement goes wholly unrewarded in Our Mutual Friend, and although Eugene and Mortimer declare, 'show me something really worth being energetic about, and I'll show you energy,' they never show us this revitalized constitution during the novel.<sup>46</sup>

It is not surprising to find the virtue of earnestness, formerly one of Dickens's most weighty words, subjected to a similar examination. The most earnest character in the novel is Bradley Headstone, who tells Lizzie, 'I only add that if it is any claim on you to be in earnest, I am in thorough earnest, dreadful earnest'.<sup>47</sup> I do not think that in any earlier novel by Dickens such a claim could be made in vain, and felt to be rightly refused. Education, the third member of the Victorian trinity of success is likewise shown to be of doubtful worth, leading to a dull, mechanized view of life and loss rather than gain in self-esteem. While these three qualities are distorted in the service of gentility there is little likelihood that they will lead

<sup>46</sup> O.M.F., p. 20.

<sup>47</sup> O.M.F., p. 397.



either to individual freedom, or bring British culture back to life from the torpor of Podsnappery, like Lazarus rising from the dead.

It is tempting to see Our Mutual Friend as Dickens's Dunciad, a vision of the complete overwhelming of national life by the forces of dullness and corruption. However, if he is influenced by Pope's last great poem, his conception of the river is typically Dickensian in its rich dialectical symbolism. The Thames may be still the open sewer it was for Pope, but it is also meant to suggest the Nile, the annual source of regeneration to Egypt, fertilizing the desert with rich deposits overflowing from its muddy depths. What Dickens is suggesting in Our Mutual Friend is that revitalization of dead English culture is to be achieved, not by the embourgeoisement of the working class through an education devised according to the dictates of Podsnap,<sup>48</sup> but by nourishing and cultivating the germs of vitality which survive in its midst, and which are even nurtured by the precariousness of life at that low level.

Not too surprisingly perhaps, Dickens calls this regenerative potential 'fancy' - a quality he links most

<sup>48</sup> 'The main end of the system of education worked by the clergy seems to be to hinder the free development of the youthful mind and to produce a race of intellectual dwarfs', wrote A. Mial, looking back over the earlier part of the century. This and similar views on nineteenth-century education are quoted in Class and Conflict in Nineteenth-Century England, edited by Patricia Hollis (London, 1973), p. 337.

frequently with working-class characters like Mr and Mrs Boffin, Betty Higden, Lizzie Hexam and Jenny Wren. Fancy is almost an overworked word in this last novel, and has attained a very complex meaning, extending far beyond any simple Wordsworthian notion. Dickens's conception of fancy is closer to Blake's or Chaucer's sense of the opposing forces of spirituality and energy conflicting within the hearts of men. These two contrary impulses create much of the dialectical tension of Our Mutual Friend, and Dickens sees fancy as able to mediate between man's conscious thought and these unconconscious inherent impulses which direct his natural being. Fancy has access to the primitive sources of energy, and possesses power to nourish and regenerate these, but it can also lead away from life and vitality in its search for something ideal, less earthy, beautiful and without pain - ultimately a desire for nirvana.

Throughout the novel, Dickens employs the complex poetic metaphor of a sacrament of regeneration to express his sense of fancy's power to revitalize individual and cultural deadness in English society. As the desert is 'born anew' of the flood waters of the Nile, so in Christian baptism the child is regenerated from the spiritual death of its original nature and 'born anew of Water' by the endowment of God's grace.<sup>49</sup> By the power of this grace the child then becomes 'a lively member' of the church, and is

<sup>49</sup> This, and all subsequent references, are taken from 'The Ministration of Public Baptism of Infants', The Book of Common Prayer (1860).

admitted into the full community and fellowship of believers. In Bleak House, Dickens attacks a narrow, evangelical conception of the elect as sole recipients of Providential grace, but here he creates his own small community of the elect - those endowed with the saving grace of fancy. If, in the real Victorian world, there was, as G.M. Young claims, 'a more than casual analogy' between Grace and the Respectable, then in the world of Our Mutual Friend, there is a more than casual analogy between the grace of fancy and the Low. For it is in these working-class characters unaffected by the mechanized and individualistic mentality of middle-class culture that the light of fancy is to be found. By analogy with the sacrament of baptism, Dickens suggests that the grace of fancy endows men with imaginative insight into the sufferings and sorrows of others - as Pip's pitying fancy led him to identify with the hunted convicts on the marshes. They thus become 'lively members' of the human community, reaching out in fellowship and understanding to other men in need; regenerated into an active life where their aspirations and energies find fulfilment in seeking out the good of others, rather than in struggling for an alienating form of competitive self-improvement. 'I have taken a fancy', is how Mrs Boffin expresses her urge to make good use at last of the Harmon money by adopting an orphan.<sup>50</sup> Charlie Hexam is ungraciously accurate when he calls Lizzie's befriending of Jenny Wren 'a ridiculous fancy of giving

<sup>50</sup> O.M.F., p. 100.



herself up to another'.<sup>51</sup> It is by inspiring such acts of common humanity that fancy checks the encroaching spiritual sterility in personal relationships, epitomized at their bleakest by the barrenness of Harmony Jail:

Bare of paint, bare of paper on the walls, bare of furniture, bare of experience of human life. Whatever is built by man for man's occupation, must, like natural creations, fulfil the intention of its existence, or soon perish. This old house had wasted more from desuetude than it would have  
wasted from use, twenty years for one. 52

The intention of man's natural existence, biologically and socially, is love and union with his fellows - the full experience of human life. Mr Boffin calls this need, simply but correctly, 'sociability', and its full meaning is implied in the kiss with which he and Mrs Boffin crush Fashion.<sup>53</sup> Through their affection and creative fancy the desert of Harmony Jail is transformed into Boffin's Bower. Without these nourishing qualities human life, too, wastes from desuetude, dwindling to a sterile form bare of all warmth and energy. When he falls in love with Lizzie, the pernicious lassitude which enervates Eugene Wrayburn gives way to a new sense of restlessness and energy which signifies his return to life. In contrast to the unbroken solitariness in the midst of crowded scenes suffered by those Dickens describes as 'in Society', most of the working-class characters out of 'Society' are shown to be part of an active, caring, sympathetic group. While self-help and individualism

51 O.M.F., p. 392.

52 O.M.F., p. 183.

53 O.M.F., p. 56.

became the gospel of the middle class in Victorian England, the institutions of the working class were founded upon the opposing ideals of co-operation and mutuality. In Our Mutual Friend, Dickens suggests that the creation of a lively community of mutual friends through the sympathetic insights of pitying fancy offers a positive alternative to the barren promised land of gentility.

As well as fostering the bonds of common fellowship, fancy safeguards the community thus created by performing a more negative function. In the sacrament of baptism, the priest prays that 'the old Adam in this Child may be so buried, that the new man may be raised up in him'. For Dickens the old Adam represents the unchecked force of physical life, that thrusting vitality, which, if unconstrained by social sympathies leads to a rampant, destructive egoism. In Martin Chuzzlewit, Pecksniff tells old Martin, 'I do a little bit of Adam still', ostensibly meaning the 'primitive' pursuit of gardening, but the real truth underlying his words shows itself shortly afterwards in his lecherous attack upon Mary.<sup>54</sup> This 'strong devil' within or 'principle of life' as Dickens variously calls it in Martin Chuzzlewit, is the dominating, passionate reality underlying human life, much more primitive and enduring than the bran-new polish of society epitomized by Veneering, or the falsifying moral childishness ordained by Podsnap for the protection of the young person. Dickens recognizes the

<sup>54</sup> M.C., p. 384.

necessity of the old Adam, for without that driving force of energy, life is dangerously enfeebled, as in little Georgiana Podsnap. Furthermore, destructive energy is as responsible for the record of human achievement as it is for deeds of violence. The restless, adventurous, pushing energy in man is needed always to overcome ingrained opposition, inertia, and all old enervated obstacles to freedom - just as it was necessary that those 'enervated and corrupted masters of the world', whose exploits so astound poor Mr Boffin, be swept over by barbarian energy to make way for a new order and greater human liberty.<sup>55</sup> The opposition between civilization and savagery, noted earlier in Charlie Hexam, manifests itself in all living things and is in a state of constant flux. Sometimes the balance shifts too far in one direction, sometimes in another, resulting on the one hand in lassitude, torpor and decay, and on the other in destruction and anarchy. It is by the grace of human sympathies and pitying fancy that the destructive force, the old Adam, in men can be held in check, just as Lizzie Hexam recognizes that her love acts as a stay to her father's potential savagery. Men who are cast out of such Fellowship altogether, as Riderhood is cast out from the society of the Porters by Miss Abbey, lose not only the warmth, nourishment and comradeship needed to sustain life, they also lose the control which that community exerted, and with it their full humanity. They become, like Alfred Lammler

<sup>55</sup> O.M.F., p. 296.



or Riderhood, debased creatures, more devils than men, in whom all instincts and energy serve naked individualism, the old Adam - rapacious and vicious. As the Rogue goes forward to claim his blood money against his erstwhile partner and friend he seems a figure of pure destructive energy, encroaching death itself, devoid of human particularity:

A man's life being to be taken and the price of it got, the hailstones to arrest the purpose must lie larger and deeper than those. He crushed through them, leaving marks in the fast-melting slush that were mere shapeless holes; one might have fancied, following, that the very fashion of humanity had departed from his feet. 56

Human fellowship, the mutual friendship engendered by a sympathetic fancy, is the only refuge from this appalling shape, and, despite Riderhood's origin, Dickens shows that it is nurtured most urgently by the precariousness and harsh reality of working-class life.

Despite the years of self-suppression endured by Bradley Headstone in his pursuit of respectability, the pulse of physical energy within him is still strong and unfulfilled: 'Yet there was enough of what was animal, and of what was fiery (though smouldering), still visible in him, to suggest that if young Bradley Headstone, when a pauper lad, had chanced to be told off for the sea, he would not have been the last man in a ship's crew'.<sup>57</sup> Any positive application of this energy for the good of his fellow men

56 O.M.F., pp. 156-7.

57 O.M.F., p. 218.

through the profession he actually chooses is precluded by the stultifying nature of his training and society's narrow conception of the teacher's role. This is a double tragedy - a personal one for Headstone in whom the frustrated, pent-up force reaches uncontrollable proportions, and a loss also for society in dire need of the life and fresh impetus he (and others like him) could perhaps have given it. Although Bradley Headstone internalizes most of the values of the dead society to which he seeks entrance, he does not quite lose the humanizing desire for the sympathetic fellowship of his own kind. In Charlie Hexam he sees a boy struggling like himself to get free of poverty and in helping him up he 'had taken the boy to heart', finding 'his drudgery lightened by communication with a brighter and more apprehensive spirit than his own'.<sup>58</sup> Then he meets Lizzie and all the long repressed passion and energy of his nature rises up in a desperate need for love and fulfilment at last. In a rare moment of self-awareness, he recognizes the power of passion to either protect man from his worst nature or push him to excesses of violence and destruction. 'No man knows till the time comes what depths are within him ...' he tells Lizzie, 'To me, you brought it; on me, you forced it; and the bottom of this raging sea ... has been heaved up ever since'.<sup>59</sup> It is a power, he tells her, that can draw him to 'any death ... any exposure and disgrace',

<sup>58</sup> O.M.F., p. 713.

<sup>59</sup> O.M.F., p. 396.

but should she agree to marry him she could equally transform the energy 'to any good - every good - with equal force'.<sup>60</sup> Lizzie does not marry him, and his passion, unchecked by any other social sympathies, lashes back against the individual who symbolizes the cause of his suffering and frustrated idealism. Finally, Charlie, a more thorough pupil of the individualistic society than his teacher, fearing that Bradley's guilty emotional entanglement with crime may weigh him down upon his upward flight, relentlessly cuts away the ties of gratitude and fellowship that bound them together. With the boy's renunciation, 'a desolate air of utter and complete loneliness fell upon him, like a visible shade'.<sup>61</sup> 'I have absolutely no friends', he tells Riderhood looking into the fire on his last night.<sup>62</sup> As he stares at the living flame, his own pulse of life, previously so strong and passionate a force, deserts him - his face 'becoming more and more haggard, its surface turning whiter and whiter as if it were being overspread with ashes, and the very texture and colour of his hair degenerating'.<sup>63</sup> Having relinquished himself to death, his final act accepts the low and pernicious fellowship he instinctively sought out as fitting partner for his destructive rage. He and Riderhood, both cast out of the human community, go into the pit together, locked, like the Lammles, in a mutually destroying hatred.

<sup>60</sup> O.M.F., p. 397.

<sup>61</sup> O.M.F., p. 710.

<sup>62</sup> O.M.F., p. 799.

<sup>63</sup> O.M.F., p. 800.



Bradley's shameful physical death returns him full circle to the squalid origins he had sought to escape in gentility. The novel presents this outcome as the grimly logical consequence of his earlier spiritual and cultural death. A further regenerative influence of fancy, which Dickens is at pains to demonstrate throughout the novel, is the way it nourishes a richness of culture and opposes the encroachment of the mechanical mentality which destroyed Headstone. Not surprisingly, rationality is the mode of thought upheld and revered by a utilitarian society, since its logic justifies and makes respectable the ethic of self-interest.<sup>64</sup> Other ways of seeing issues, like compassion, co-operation or intuition are sneered at by the Alfred Lammles as 'sentimentality', or swept by those like Podsnap from the face of the earth. Scientific rationalism became in Dickens's day and remains still, the dominant form of communication about the world, to which all other kinds of reasoning are made subservient. It is

<sup>64</sup> 'By following the dictates of their own interests, landowners and farmers become, in the natural course of things, the best trustees and guardians for the public'. Part of a speech to the House of Commons Committee on Poor Laws, quoted by the Hammonds, p. 151, n.4. The authors give a detailed account of the way the ideas of men like Ricardo, Bentham and Malthus were taken up by the middle class generally and 'hardened into a rigid and inexorable theory from which these [men] would have shrunk'. This process was aided by 'the fact that at the beginning of the nineteenth century the mathematical and physical groups of science were in the ascendant, and thus at a moment of critical importance in the development of economic speculation, all reasoning inclined to the deductive and abstract method'. pp. 140-1.

a form amenable to a mechanistic, conforming mentality in its ability to deny complexity and systematize variety out of existence. Against this mental regime, fancy, especially as it manifests itself in the speech and thought of the poor and uneducated in the novel, offers an alternative way of knowing the world.

In opposition to gentility's desire to repress variety and impose mental conformity, fancy encourages an awareness of the complexity of all experience, especially through its capacity for metaphorical thought, playing upon the principles of diversity and similarity. Throughout the novel Dickens uses such constructions as 'fancy would have supposed' or 'one might have fancied' again and again to bring home the way imagination and its images are frequently at the root of a true understanding and response to all areas of human existence.<sup>65</sup> This alternative way of gaining knowledge of the world to the 'mechanical stowage' of scientific facts, is, like the forces of energy and passion, of primitive origin, and its accumulated truth and wisdom are embodied in the metaphorical language of popular speech, proverbs, poetry and tales which Dickens weaves into the texture of the novel. The common impulse to understand through linguistic creativity is expressed in Our Mutual Friend by the frequent, almost spontaneous generation of names for people, which, unlike those given formally at christenings,

<sup>65</sup> A good example of this usage is the passage referring to Riderwood already quoted on p.366 above.



reflect the sudden dart of intuitive fitness of title for person. Thus the Golden Dustman, Rumpty Wilfer, Jenny Wren, Harmony Jail, Fascination Fledgeby, all reflect, sometimes through ironic dissimilarity, some essential quality belonging to their owners, caught and enjoyed in the artful bestowal of a word or phrase. Fairy stories and nursery rhymes are repositories of an almost infinite supply of images by which human kind through the ages attempt to explain, fix and understand their lives, each individual experience enriched and deepened by its place within this long-shared, common cultural tradition. So Eugene Wrayburn despite his sophisticated assumption of boredom, turns to simple riddles and rhymes in an effort to understand his own emotions, and Jenny Wren uses fairy tales to probe towards the truth. Like all artistic fancies, Jenny invents and reworks her materials, investing the tradition with new areas of meaning, just as her creator, through the diversity of the novel, enriches the old, apparently trite phrase 'our mutual friend' with a many-faceted ambiguity.

From the expressive resources of this fertile popular tradition of language, tale and image, Bradley Headstone has been disinherited by his education and ambition. In moments of his most urgent need to express himself fully, he stumbles inarticulately and woodenly for a speech which can convey meaning other than facts. However, despite Dickens's emphasis on the lingusitic richness of common speech in Our Mutual Friend, none of the characters so manifests its potential that it seems powerful enough to challenge the



dullness of gentility. Nowhere is there language so vibrant, anarchic and passionate as that of Sam Weller or Sairey Gamp. Jenny Wren puts up a splendid fight, but one cannot help feeling that her resources are less rich, more precarious, even, than Sairey's. It is hard to agree with Garret Stewart's assertion that, 'she comes to symbolize the Dickensian fancy at its most spacious and versatile'.<sup>66</sup>

Jenny is certainly versatile - brilliantly so in the constant shifting and manoeuvring of her wits to stay on top in the spiteful game she and life play against each other, but there is little spaciousness in the squalid, enclosing little corner in which the game is played out. This absence of the anarchic energy of street language in any of the characters is matched by the general prose style of the novel. At his best, in the last two novels completed, Dickens achieves a classicality of his own, very far from the exuberant, witty, anarchic outpouring of his earlier work. Almost the whole of Great Expectations is sustained in this powerful prose, but in Our Mutual Friend there is more variety, and there are lapses into a style altogether more weak and tired. However, the opening chapter describing Lizzie and Gaffer on the river almost compensates for any other flaw in the writing, it is so rich and poetic in meaning, so finely observed, so carefully modulated and flows on the surface with such easy grace, while its onward drive is strong, energetic and sure. It is the quality of

<sup>66</sup> Garret Stewart, p. 199.

writing only achieved by the greatest writers at the height of their powers, and must of its very nature as high art be far from the popular language of the streets, no matter how creative and witty.

It is the tendency always for the idealizing imagination, to move upward and away from realities such as those of the grim city streets. This is the ambiguous duality of fancy which Dickens first explores in David Copperfield, and presents symbolically in the poignant image of Mr Dick's kite. As the subsequent histories of David and Pip demonstrate, the desire for a more graceful existence, a flight of fancy for the ideal, can lead away from life altogether, and decoy those who so aspire into the dead world of gentility. However, without any upward imaginative impulse man degrades his human potential, resting inert and vicious in the lowest level of his nature, like Orlick, Riderhood or Fledgeby, whose habit, Dickens writes, was 'not to jump, or leap, or make an upward spring, at anything in life, but to crawl at everything'.<sup>67</sup> By this last novel Dickens had come to believe that only by an upward springing of the imagination was any real conquest of the limitations of men's physical environment possible - certainly it was not to be achieved by a flight to gentility. By an act of creative fancy the Boffins transform their dustheaps into a bower, and Jenny Wren clothes the sordid actuality of a drunken father in the gentler fiction of a naughty child.

<sup>67</sup> O.M.F., p. 431.

For Lizzie Hexam, Eugene Wrayburn provides a symbol on to which she can project similar idealizing fancies. When he meets her after the final angry scene with her brother and Headstone, 'his lightest touch, his lightest look, his very presence beside her in the dark common street, were like glimpses of an enchanted world, which it was natural for jealousy and all meanness to be unable to bear the brightness of, and to gird at as bad spirits might'.<sup>68</sup>

Unlike David's and Pip's capitulation to aristocratic glamour, Dickens goes out of his way to show that Lizzie's idealization of Wrayburn does not turn her away from her own world and its values. The physical strength, courage and human sympathies nourished by that world are the means by which she finally saves his life. Through their marriage Dickens undoubtedly intends to symbolize at a formal level the regeneration of dead culture with vitality. Bradley Headstone, the rejected suitor, is rejected by Dickens for this purpose of regeneration too. Given the socially representative roles that individual characters are intended to play in this novel, his dismissal must be seen as Dickens's negative judgement on the earnest, ambitious working-class men he frequently saw trying to improve themselves at educational institutions around the country. His depiction of the character and psychology of Bradley Headstone makes his reasons clear. Despite all the sympathy he felt for them, and the validity he accorded their aspirations, he

<sup>68</sup> O.M.F., p. 406.



nevertheless believed that these young men were losing all that was most vital from their own culture and replacing it by the mental conformity and narrowness he had come to fear and hate. Bradley Headstone, the last boy from the city streets in Dickens's fiction, has been disinherited of all the lively qualities that engaged his fancy in Sam Weller, Young Bailey, even Charley Bates and the Artful Dodger. By losing his sense of source and cultural tradition, Headstone loses self-identity and, inevitably, self-respect - a sad conclusion to the optimistic promise of progress held out by that archetypal modern man of the working class, Sam Weller, in Dickens's first novel.

For all the seeming logic of the marriage between Lizzie and Eugene, it suffers from the sense of genteel diminution typical of the solutions Dickens tends to offer at the close of his narratives. It is all much too easy to satisfy the complex social problems raised by the rest of the text. The upward impulse of Dickens's imagination here, is not transforming reality so much as escaping into an 'enchanted world' of wish-fulfilment; it is that other impulse of fancy away from life altogether. The most damaging evasion lies in the conception of Lizzie, rather than Wrayburn, who is an interesting and complex character. Dickens cannot bring himself to show her as really of the streets - she lacks all the passion, earthiness and animal vigour her role demands. Gentility, the very force she is created to oppose, creeps in and devitalizes its own enemy.

In this last novel, the struggle between the contrary forces of energy and gentility, vitality and death, imagination and escapism, always present in his fiction, is brought into the centre to become the dominant theme. It is inevitably poignant to find Dickens at last consciously confronting the tensions within his own art between the impulses of generation and degeneration, when he himself was moving fairly swiftly towards death.

The attraction of death pulls like a strong current in the novel; not the spiritual sterility of Podsnappery, but that related impulse towards ease, simplification and the absence of suffering and struggle - Pip's 'dream of a star'. It is a tender voice, like that of the river which whispers to Betty Higden at the end of her pilgrimage though life 'Come to me, come to me! When the cruel shame and terror you have so long fled from, most beset you, come to me!' <sup>69</sup> The structural centre of the novel which gathers together the tugging oppositions and holds them momentarily in that finely suspended balance which only Dickens seems able to achieve, is the scene where Riderhood is brought into the Fellowship insensible from the river. In the urgency of the prose which relates the combined struggle and eagerness of the living men to resuscitate the nearly dead, Dickens makes us experience as an emotional actuality that common basic urge to protect and sustain physical life from which the bonds of fellowship are created. It is typical of his

<sup>69</sup> O.M.F., p. 504.

generous humanity, as well as his artistic virtuosity, that he should demonstrate this magnetic pull of human sympathy towards the principle of life itself<sup>70</sup> through the agency of the most debased creature in the novel. 'Everything that lives is holy', but any of us, as Riderhood inevitably does, can violate the gift of life within. There is also in the unconscious Riderhood an impulse tending in the opposite direction from life:

Now he is struggling harder to get back. And yet - like us all, when we swoon - like us all, every day of our lives when we wake - he is instinctively unwilling to be restored to the consciousness of this existence, and would be left dormant, if he 71 could.

His own relentless energy made Dickens write passionately to Forster after seeing his old friend Macready in retirement, 'However strange it is to be never at rest, and never satisfied, and ever trying after something that is never reached ... how clear it is that it must be, and that one is driven by an irresistible might until the journey is worked out! ... As for repose - for some men there's no such thing in this life'.<sup>72</sup> There can be no doubting the truth of that assertion to Dickens's own life, but in the words he writes of Riderhood there is a moving sense, which cannot be missed, of personal tiredness and desire for repose from that relentless, driving energy which consumed him.

<sup>70</sup> Dickens expresses an obviously related idea in Edwin Drood, when he writes of the 'innate shrinking of dust with the breath of life in it from dust out of which the breath of life has passed'. E.D., p. 134.

<sup>71</sup> O.M.F., pp. 444-5.

<sup>72</sup> Forster, II, 197-8.



The flagging of inventive energy towards the end of Our Mutual Friend shows itself in the drift towards ease and genteel avoidance of real problems. 'I want to be so much worthier than the doll in a doll's house', Bella Wilfer resolves bravely at the outset of her marriage, but gentility forbids such engagement with vulgar life.<sup>73</sup> One cannot for a moment imagine the coarse, physical vigour of natural life being allowed to flow through the veins of the pretty little flowers and birds which inhabit Bella's bower, as it flows through those at the beginning of Chaucer's Tales. The new order of wealthy benevolence that she and John represent is still the patronage which, Dickens makes us feel earlier, Betty Higden is right to evade in order to maintain her self-respect. John's and Bella's sympathies are all contained within the small, select circle of deserving acquaintanceship, safe, but unnourished by the passions and energies flowing through the dark common streets. A rejection of these by Dickens is always a sign that he is losing his firm artistic base in perceived reality, drifting, like Bella in the high, new house her husband has prepared for her, into another more etherealized existence. The siren voice which sings 'Come up and be dead' is a tempting one, especially for those like Jenny Wren wishing to escape the burdens of pain, toil and disgrace. Few would grudge her the moments of tranquillity she experiences high up among the clouds on the roof-top

<sup>73</sup> O.M.F., p. 679.

garden, or, when younger, in the ecstatic trances brought by the dream-children who lift her out of suffering. But some critics have been too moved, perhaps, by Jenny's pathos and less by her fighting resilience. The passages of release are not nearly so fine as the snappish wit, her sharp perception of fraud and dishonesty, and her sudden impulses of generous humour or mocking self-depreciation. The energetic inventiveness of the writing which creates these qualities contrasts tellingly with a certain vague slackness, rather over-used imagery which conveys the former:

'How do you feel when you are dead?' asked Fledgby, much perplexed.

'Oh, so tranquil!' cried the little creature, smiling.  
'Oh, so peaceful and so thankful! And you hear the people who are alive, crying and working, and calling to one another down in the close dark streets, and you seem to pity them so! And such a chain has fallen from you, and such a strange good sorrowful happiness comes upon you!'

74

But it is in the close dark streets that Jenny Wren must pursue her dolls' dressmaking art. Without the flights of vision perhaps she could not transform her rich ladies into colourful toys, but without the streets she would lose the vital material for her art to transform. Moreover, 'common' and 'close' are not unambiguous words as Dickens uses them. In the closeness of confined streets those who are fully alive with human sympathy can call to each other and be heard in common fellowship and mutual aid.

Like Jenny Wren, Dickens also depended upon the life of the streets to renew his creative vitality. Writing to Forster from Switzerland on the difficulties he was experiencing with Dombey and Son he put his problems down to 'the absence of streets and numbers of figures. I can't express how much I want these. It seems as if they supplied something to my brain, which it cannot bear, when busy, to lose ... But the toil and labour of writing, day after day, without that magic lantern, is IMMENSE!! ... My figures seem disposed to stagnate without crowds about them'.<sup>75</sup>

Dickens's creative genius was nurtured by these London streets and their working-class inhabitants; his first novel takes its life from them, and his last depends equally upon them for its artistic vision and energy. At this lowest, most uncivilized level of working-class life, passions and energies were still fiercely alive, and this inevitably invoked repugnance and fear of anarchy and violence in Dickens, as in all Victorian middle-class observers. Despite such feelings, Dickens believed that it was from this social stratum that regeneration of the stagnating English culture could be achieved, for no less reason than that it was the source which revitalized his own imaginative forces against the enfeebling pressure of gentility. Like Podsnap, Dickens is sometimes tempted, especially at the conclusions of his novels, to sweep complexity, problems, physical reality

<sup>75</sup> Letters, IV, 612-613.



itself from the face of the earth, but his street characters continually subvert this impulse, bringing him back to earth and insisting upon the real variety and random unexpectedness of life.

Stumping on his way to Boffin's Bower for the first time, Wegg is shown the way by a remarkable hoarse gentleman and his yet more remarkable donkey, Eddard. The pair have no function in the plot and perhaps no function in life other than a self-sustaining delight in their own performances. 'Keep yer hi on his ears' warns the hoarse gentleman, and for a moment all those early leap-froggers of life flash into brilliant remembered life, as 'he [the hoarse gentleman] the hind hoofs, the truck, and Edward, all seemed to fly into the air together, in a kind of apotheosis'.<sup>76</sup> This is life and art subsumed together and lifted up from the here and now of daily existence by the spontaneous liberation of adventurous, creative energy. Such moments come only in Dickens, they are the very essence of his genius; and for Dickens they can only spring to life in the streets. Sadly, despite the continual play upon ascending and descending imagery, this is the only real apotheosis in Our Mutual Friend.<sup>77</sup> The endings to most of the stories in the novel are flights to the nirvana of gentility, not uprushes of

<sup>76</sup> O.M.F., p. 55.

<sup>77</sup> Jennifer Gribble also relates this imagery to the suppression of anarchic impulses by gentility, especially in relation to Eugene Wrayburn. 'Depth and Surface in Our Mutual Friend', Essays in Criticism, 25 (April, 1975), 197-213.

transforming imaginative power. Compared to these other endings, Bradley Headstone's 'Come down' is a hard-won recommitment to reality, however hopeless. It is a pessimistic conclusion; but of all the characters in the novel, only he escapes the sentimentalizing debilitation of gentility.

## CONCLUSION

### Trapped in Varnish

The flies fell into the traps by hundreds.

There was one little picture-room devoted to a few of the regular sticky old Saints, with sinews like whipcord, hair like Neptune's, wrinkles like tattooing, and such coats of varnish that every holy personage served for a fly-trap, and became what is now called in the vulgar tongue a  
Catch-em-alive O. 1

These two images are miniaturized versions of English society as Dickens depicts it in Little Dorrit, in which almost every character is held fast, like a human fly, in the sticky surface of Mrs General's genteel varnish. In this novel Dickens gives the most complete expression to his sense of gentility as a mental prison, clogging down the human spirit. His repugnance for most aspects of life in 'our right little, tight little island'<sup>2</sup> lends an enclosed, nightmarish quality to his social vision, only to be surpassed by the horror of Cloisterham in which life is literally entombed within its mouldering walls. England, in the unrelaxing social, political and religious strangleholds of Mrs General, the Circumlocution Office and Mrs Clennam, is being stifled to death in a claustrophobic prison of its own making. Reified systems, 'genteel mystification' and evangelical hypocrisy rigidly exclude the

<sup>1</sup> L.D., pp. 62, 193.

<sup>2</sup> L.D., p. 57.



vitalizing impact of reality - that 'wide stare' of honesty fearfully avoided at the opening of the novel. Within such a mental prison, human creativity, spontaneity and innovation are all suppressed, as in Daniel Doyce, since change or truth in any form is recognized, rightly, by those manipulating the systems as a threat to their ascendancy. Human relationships within 'Society' are frozen out of existence; at crowded dinner parties solitary guests exchange words, but no fellow feeling. William Dorrit's ascent of the Alps (whose peaks are grimly reminiscent of Society's icy bosom) to a world of frost, death and severely restricted movement provides the most sharply ironic symbol for the fate of all those who, like David Copperfield, Pip, and Bradley Headstone, aspire to climb the genteel heights in Dickens's novels. For them all, and, we must conclude, for Dickens as well, the journey upwards leads away from the human feelings and affections they have experienced in the humble world of their origins, perceived as shameful, to an existence devoid of joy, humanity and creative vigour.

This horrifying depiction of England and English society in the last novels is by no means, for Dickens, a purely fictional creation. It is his despairing portrayal of social reality as he perceives it in Victorian England after the mid-century. By this late stage of his career his anxiety about the many aspects of gentility in English society, and in his own personal and artistic life, had fused into an all-embracing, coherent philosophical vision;

social and individual relationships, every kind of human creativity, physical well-being, and spiritual freedom, all are interrelated in Dickens's complex conception of gentility as a fundamental threat to life itself. A letter written to Forster in 1855, two years before Little Dorrit was published, decrying the English pictures in an art exhibition he had visited in Paris, establishes beyond doubt the relationship between his preoccupations in the real world and in his fiction:

It is no use disguising the fact that what we know to be wanting in the men is wanting in their works - character, fire, purpose, and the power of using the vehicle and the model as mere means to an end. There is a horrid respectability about most of the best of them - a little, finite, systematic routine in them, strangely expressive to me of the state of England itself. ... There are no end of bad pictures among the French, but, Lord! the goodness also! - the fearlessness of them; the bold drawing; the dashing conception; the passion and action in them! ... Don't think it a part of my despondency about public affairs, and my fear that our national glory is on the decline, when I say that mere form and conventionalities usurp, in English art, as in English government and social relations, the place of living force and truth. 3

Dickens's dissatisfaction at this time with his own personal life, and the feeling of constraint within his marriage, may have added an edge of irritation to his sense of social discontent, but it did not distort his diagnosis of the sickness which was debilitating British culture. Every indication suggests that by around 1850 the period of dynamic social and industrial conquest was over. Nearly all Samuel Smiles' factory heroes who had risen to eminence from humble birth were drawn from the late eighteenth and

3 Forster, II, 172.

early nineteenth centuries. Harold Perkin estimates that the chances of working men becoming owners or leaders of industry steadily declined during the century: 'The incipient managerialism of the joint-stock company favoured the already middle-class office worker rather than the manual worker'.<sup>4</sup> More important still, was that while elementary education became more widely available, secondary education for the working class almost disappeared, as the free grammar schools were converted into fee-charging day and boarding schools for middle-class pupils. 'Thus with industrial opportunities declining on the one side, and educational opportunities disappearing on the other, upward mobility for the working class was probably at its nadir', concludes Perkin.<sup>5</sup>

The retention of the concept of gentility as a central part of the bourgeois ideal meant that the middle class remained vulnerable to aristocratic flattery and patronage once the period of active political rivalry had passed. As already noted in the discussion of Pip's seduction by Satis House, the influence and glamour of the aristocracy re-emerged strongly during the 1850's, and, according to Harold Perkin, this goes far to explain why Britain, which led the Industrial Revolution, remained 'the most traditional and aristocratic of industrialised societies'.<sup>6</sup> The belated and unequal marriage between the aristocracy and a sycophantic

<sup>4</sup> Perkin, p. 426.

<sup>5</sup> Perkin, pp. 426-7.

<sup>6</sup> Perkin, p. 436.



middle class, depicted by Dickens in Hard Times, Little Dorrit and Our Mutual Friend, robbed the bourgeoisie of its active thrust for change, and moved it from conquest to consolidation and conformity. Instead of creating new industry, capitalists put their money into landed property, and rather than apprenticing their sons in the works, they sent them off to public schools to acquire a classical education and become gentlemen.

In 1850 national economic growth reached its lowest ever level, and by the end of the 1870's industrial production had also slumped to a growth rate of 1.7 per cent per annum from a level around 3.5 per cent which had been maintained for every previous decade since 1810. After the mid-century, British industrialists increasingly hesitated before investing in anything new, and British inventions were taken up faster and more extensively in America, Germany and elsewhere - just as Doyce receives only foreign recognition in Little Dorrit. Growing genteel distaste for the practicalities and physical realities of labour and industry, illustrated in the novel by Meagles' patronizing attitude to Doyce, led, in the real world, to neglect of technical education, and soon many of the most significant products, like the sewing machine and the internal combustion engine, originated in other countries. Harold Perkin writes: 'Beneath ... the undoubted industrial supremacy of Britain there was a complacency towards innovation which goes far towards explaining the loss of momentum which ultimately

cost her the leadership'.<sup>7</sup> Dickens was not so kind. He denounced it as a wilful stifling to death of all national energy and creativity in the name of gentility, in order to perpetuate the privileges, power and wealth of the governing classes.

None of the individual endings to any of the novels, in which, from Bleak House onwards, Dickens so brilliantly analyses and exposes these many aspects of gentility, is able to offer a solution which matches the scope or the social complexity of the problems depicted. The challenge is met earlier; in fact before it has been fully articulated. In the character of the street urchins, Dickens creates a positive, contrasting image to set against the life-denying conformity of gentility. In them, he articulates an alternative mentality to the pervasive mental outlook gripping respectable Victorian England. With their anarchic hostility to any form of pomposity, they are instinctive enemies of gentility from the start. To the Dodger at his trial, to Trabb's boy meeting Pip, and to Sam Weller on every possible occasion, the impulse to mock, ridicule and otherwise deflate comes as second nature. Nothing sharpens their zest for life so much as a victorious battle of wits with authority or outraged respectability. Where gentility shrinks from anything new, from the difficult or from the dangerous, confining itself within a secure, little framework of conventional thought and timid action, the high animal

<sup>7</sup> Perkin, pp. 412-413.

spirits of the urchins seek out all that is different or odd, and meet the unexpected with physical vigour, mental agility and creative innovation. None of these qualities, as depicted by Dickens in characters like Sam Weller, Young Bailey or the Artful Dodger, is whimsical or fanciful. The urchins' ability to play at leap-frog with life is born of the tough resilience bred into them on the London streets. It stems from a stoical acceptance of the necessary hardships and dangers of life at that level, which is the opposite of Mrs General's determination to hide away unpleasant facts in genteel cupboards, or of Podsnap's bowdlerized version of life, without the facts of life, for the young person. Youths like Charley Bates know the meaning of being 'scragged' from infancy; Sam Weller has personal experience of 'unfurnished lodgings'; and, as Mrs Gamp rightly says of Bailey: 'There's nothing he don't know ... All the wickedness of the world is Print to him'.<sup>8</sup> Much of the questing, adventurous spirit which Dickens portrays in these urchin figures, comes from this ability to look the worst in the face, and then to actively set about making the best of it. In them, more than in any of his other characters, Dickens captures that creative spirit which invigorated English life at the beginning of the nineteenth century; breaking up old patterns and transforming the whole material basis of society with an impulse of innovative, self-confident, aggressive energy.

<sup>8</sup> O.T., p. 131; P.P., p. 209; M.C., p. 424.



Concern with material reality, even determination to conquer or reshape that reality, does not stultify the imaginative capacities of Dickens's urchins in the way a desire to escape life is shown to stultify it in characters such as Mr Dombey. Rather like Mrs Gamp in her fabrication of the manifold activities of the Harris family, the urchins seize upon the actualities of their lives and turn them into extravagant flights of fancy. They add intensity to real experience, rather than attempt, like Pip with Magwitch, to powder it over with the pale respectability of gentility. In the self-delight and creative audacity with which the urchins dramatize their personalities, they assert the freedom of human imagination over inert physical necessity. Self-fulfilment by these means is not achieved at the expense of looking down upon others, as gentility demands, but instead it dignifies and adds ceremony to the ordinary lives of all who participate. So the coachmen confer honour upon their colleague, Tony Weller, in his good fortune; so the men at Todgers irradiate their dinner with a shared glamour; and so Mr Plornish, in Little Dorrit, infuses a ceremonial grace into his relationship with his impoverished old father-in-law by addressing him in 'the form which always expressed his highest ideal of a combination of ceremony with sincerity'.<sup>9</sup> The ostentatious display of a Podsnap or a Stiltstalking freezes and stupefies everything it touches into a lifeless formality, but the ceremonies

<sup>9</sup> L.D., pp. 578-9.

invented by the urchins add colour, distinction and vivacity to the humblest occasion. In these characters, Dickens celebrates the potential in man to live up to his full nature, exploiting and relishing his physical vigour and appetites, while at the same time continually liberating himself from the constraints of physical necessity by the upward flight of his creative fancy. As Garret Stewart aptly writes of Sam Weller: 'He is a portrait of the whole man in his prime, a creature of soul and body, of imaginative and animal spirits'.<sup>10</sup>

Dickens identifies closely with these urchin characters, both artistically and at a personal level. Forster, often perceptive in his remarks on Dickens's character, writes: 'Undoubtedly one of the impressions left by [his] letters, is that of the intensity and tenacity with which he recognised, realized, contemplated, cultivated, and thoroughly enjoyed, his own individuality in even its most trivial manifestations'.<sup>11</sup> However, although these urchins undoubtedly owe much of their comic inventiveness, linguistic exuberance, and physical vitality to those same qualities in their creator, they should not be seen as figments born entirely of his own fancy. All the characteristics which make up the urchin are firmly based in the actual working-class culture of the London streets. Dickens's art is nourished and liberated by these qualities because he too

<sup>10</sup> Garret Stewart, pp. 84-5.

<sup>11</sup> Forster, II, 378.

had shared the experience of the urchin's challenging urban environment. It is because the urchin figure is conceived so concretely in a real social culture beyond a merely fictional world that it is able to offer such an adequate challenge to gentility.

The other main qualities of working-class culture which Dickens sets against the influence of gentility are the retention of real feeling, spontaneity and passion. As opposed to the symbolism of frost, death and dust by which he depicts genteel society, working-class relationships are frequently centred upon the image of the affectionate home, in the midst of which there usually burns a warm and living fire. As with the characteristics of urchin types, Dickens's portrayal of the strong emotional ties of working-class life is based upon observation, and should not be dismissed, as it sometimes is, as sentimentality or over-idealization. The harsh conditions in which most working people struggled to survive in Victorian England kept them fully aware of the physical realities which gentility attempted to deny, and for this reason their sympathies were easily engaged by the misfortune and needs of others. Thomas Wright, not noted for undue sentimentality towards the working class, puts the case clearly:

Brotherly love abounds among them, and those who have the opportunity of seeing with what kindness and self-sacrifice they assist friends and neighbours in distress know that they have that charity that covereth a multitude of sins. To them, living as they do by manual labour, and following more or less dangerous occupations, the import of the text, that in the midst of life we are in death, is more frequently and



pointedly brought home than to any other class; and <sup>12</sup>  
the lesson is not lost upon them.

Wright's testimony is verified repeatedly in the autobiographical accounts of working-class life written during the nineteenth century. Dickens's insistence upon these generous qualities in his depiction of many of the working-class characters in his fiction provides the sharpest contrast to the frigidity and heartlessness of his genteel characters and even to the lifeless purity of an Agnes or a Tom Pinch. It also represents his total rejection of the myth of the degenerate poor. Even when the feelings and emotions of his working-class characters are more disreputable, as in Sairey Gamp, Magwitch or Bradley Headstone, these too, have a positive, if rather frightening value for Dickens. They represent a mode of being which, unlike the artificial veneer of feeling inculcated by polite society, is still fully alive and responsive. While such passionate natures always contain a latent threat to order and stability, it is they who generate the creative energy needed to keep society vigorous and innovative.

In an age which over-subscribed to rational and scientific philosophies, working people's lack of much formal education provided a last place of refuge for the intuitive wisdom of the heart upon which Dickens placed such store. It is the combination of this untaught imagination with the sense of physical reality which nurtures a pitying fancy; that capacity by which men move out of themselves to

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Wright, p. 83.

indentify fully with the sorrow and happiness of their fellows. This leads to a delicacy of perception and kindly tact unequalled by any of the more refined characters in the novels, no matter how benevolent. Mr Plornish, turning William Dorrit gently to the wall when his well-intentioned donation of a plebeian copper coin has humiliated the Father of the Marshalsea to tears, provides a fine example of Dickens's characteristic exposure of gentility by placing it, without comment, alongside the true courtesy of the humble.<sup>13</sup> This pitying fancy, nurtured by working-class culture, generates all those qualities of compassion, fellowship and mutual support which Dickens puts forward in his fiction as genuine ideals worthy of men's aspiration, in preference to the sterile goal of competitive individual ambition. Dickens does not deny the need for aspiration among the working class. Although he sees the harsh conditions of their lives as fertile ground for the growth of altruistic feeling, he is equally aware that it is fertile ground also for crime and disease, and that its restricted mental horizons, like those of the marshes, can lead to a frustration of ideal fancies. This is a problem Dickens does not really resolve in his novels. While the compassion and fellowship he depicts in working-class characters like Daniel and Ham Peggotty and Joe Gargery are perfectly legitimate human ideals, they do not offer any means of effecting a permanent alleviation of the inequalities of

<sup>13</sup> L.D., pp. 66-7.

working-class life. Dickens's dislike and distrust of collective political or industrial action by working people to better their existences, restricted his advocacy and approbation of mutuality and co-operation to personal relationships only, where the radical potential of such qualities could not become fully effective as a force for social change.

The positive role of working-class characters in Dickens's fiction is encompassed in the creative anarchy of the urchin, the free passion of the angry women, and the gregarious warmth of families like the Peggottys. However, it is also through working-class figures that Dickens depicts some of the most negative effects of gentility. The understanding he creates, in the dramatic presentation of characters like Ham, Jo the crossing-sweeper, Pip and Bradley Headstone, of the way gentility is used to destroy self-respect in working-class people, subduing them with a sense of shame and guilt, has not been surpassed. His rendering of class humiliation in these individuals is as valid today as it was in Victorian England. Such feelings are more deeply embedded in the class antagonisms of our culture, even now, than any political or economic inequalities; these, as Dickens shows in Bleak House, Little Dorrit or Our Mutual Friend, are, in any case, largely sanctioned by the social myths perpetuated by gentility. It is by the processes of alienation and reification Dickens claims, as Marx also was to do, that the working class are manipulated into accepting the injustices of their unequal social and



economic position. In the uncomfortable consciousness of the gulf between the smooth educated formality of the governing and managerial classes and their own uncouth appearance, rough speech, and stumbling social manner, working people generally, like Jo in Bleak House, are inclined to murmur that they are 'werry, truly, hearty sorry'. From a reading of a considerable portion of the national press today it would not be difficult to find equivalent statements to those made by Alderman Cute, Mr Filer and Sir Joseph Bowley, M.P., in The Chimes, which convince Trotty Veck that the working class has no business in the new year. Well before Freud wrote Civilization and its Discontents, Dickens had come to appreciate the way guilt is manipulated by those in control of society as a means of suppressing discontent.

Also like Freud, Dickens understood that the destruction of men's self-respect leads, almost inevitably, to impulses of aggression. Such feelings in self-serving individuals like Noah Claypole, Uriah Heep, Bitzer, Wegg and Riderhood motivate a tendency towards criminality, cheating, bullying and underhand malice, but in frustrated idealists like Bradley Headstone, aggression can lead directly towards committed class violence. Again, there is no other depiction in Victorian fiction of class hatred to compare with the intensity and authenticity with which Dickens registers it in Bradley Headstone's passionate hatred of Wrayburn, or, indeed, in the vicious subservience of Uriah Heep.

It is in Bradley Headstone also that Dickens looks most

critically at the alienating effects of education upon the working class. When one recalls all the laborious and earnest efforts made by working men during the nineteenth century to acquire the education needed for self-improvement, Dickens's negative delineation seems somewhat harsh. When he spoke to such men, however, at their institutions, he was never less than encouraging, admiring and interested. His underlying disquiet grows out of a genuine anxiety that the kind of education available to them would lead only to mental conformity and loss of culture. His fears gain credibility if one considers the narrow, authoritarian conservatism of so many of the respectable working-class trade union leaders and political reformers of mid-Victorian society. Thomas Wright, himself a notable self-made man, is unromantically honest about the effects of education on working people:

As a principle it ought to be the aim of educated working men to improve their class; but ... their individual object is, as a rule, to improve themselves out of the working class. 14

Harold Perkin, likewise, argues that the great reliance working people came to place upon self-improvement through education was their 'Achilles' Heel' - the means by which they absorbed the middle-class ideals of moral and economic competitive individualism.<sup>15</sup> Given Dickens's sense that the qualities most able to repulse gentility were sheltered and nurtured in working-class culture, it is hardly

14 Thomas Wright, p. 11.

15 Perkin, p. 308.



surprising that he viewed the embourgeoisement of their brightest spirits with despair. The descent from Sam Weller to Bradley Headstone charts the destructive encroachment of genteel enervation, and provides a pessimistic record of Dickens's loss of faith in the possibility of conquest. Flora Thompson, born six years after Dickens's death, describes the last phase of the cultural impoverishment of the working class which Dickens had foreseen almost a century before. Having documented the material gains of those she calls the new kind of people, in terms of their 'silver', their 'elaborate afternoon teacloths' and their 'fashionable knick-knacks', she concludes:

Those were the lines along which they were developing. Spiritually, they had lost ground, rather than gained it. Their working-class forefathers had had religious or political ideals; their talk had not lost the raciness of the soil and was seasoned with native wit which, if sometimes crude, was authentic. Few of this section of their sons and daughters were church-goers, or gave much thought to religious matters ... they professed to subscribe to its dogmas and to be shocked at the questioning of the most outworn of these; but, in reality, their creed was that of 16 keeping up appearances.

Dickens's personal impatience with the English creed of keeping up appearances manifests itself in his own flights from gentility in the company of younger, more bohemian men like Wilkie Collins, and in his increasingly frequent trips to Europe, where he felt life to be freer from moral and social conformity.<sup>17</sup> However, he was never

<sup>16</sup> Lark Rise to Candleford, p. 535.

<sup>17</sup> He expresses this belief at some length in an article aptly entitled 'Insularities', Household Words, 19 January 1856, reprinted in Miscellaneous Papers, II, 80-86.



able to cut himself adrift completely - like the individuals he depicts in Little Dorrit, he too was trapped in the varnish of English conventionalities. There is, indeed, as much of Dickens in Pip, Bradley Headstone and William Dorrit, as there is in Sam Weller or Young Bailey, and, like the former men, he was always painfully and sensitively in need of proving his social acceptability. Forster is again perceptive, writing that Dickens 'was sensitive in a passionate degree to praise and blame, which yet he made it for the most part a point of pride to assume indifference to'.<sup>18</sup> It is easy to be beguiled by the surface dazzle of Dickens's apparently successful social life, but at times he may well have felt like Mr Merdle, wandering in alienated isolation, like an uninvited guest, through the brilliancy of his own life.

It is almost as if Dickens attempted to alleviate his loneliness and insecurity by turning his readership into a huge gregarious family with whom he could share spontaneously all his feelings and experiences. The obsessive desire he felt for the sympathetic praise and approbation of an admiring audience kept him firmly trapped within the moral world of the respectable middle class. This is evidenced in his private life by his extreme reticence about his childhood, by his urge to vindicate his separation from Catherine with public explanations, and in the absolute secrecy surrounding his affair with Ellen Ternan. Unlike

<sup>18</sup> Forster, II, 193.

George Eliot, a much greater moralist, Dickens was not prepared to put at risk the approval of his readers by challenging the conventionalities.

In his art this submission to gentility debilitated his creative vigour in exactly the way he shows it debilitating all aspects of life. Whenever he touches upon issues closely connected to the central tenets of Victorian morality or genteel opinion, especially those related to death, or sex, or the idealization of women, his writing becomes tendentious and flat, or leans heavily upon inflated rhetorical devices which attempt to disguise a lack of conviction by over-emphasis. In a similar way the soothing endings of many of his novels can be read as attempts to propitiate conventionality by tidying away, like Mrs General, all the unpleasant, worrying aspects of social reality his own art insistently raises in the rest of the text.

However, out of these weaknesses grow his great strengths. Dickens understands the working of gentility in individuals and society so completely because he knows it intimately in himself. The great portraits of William Dorrit's vanity and weaknesses, of Pip's snobbery and attendant guilt, and of Bradley Headstone's self-destroying passions gain their artistic authenticity from their creator's refined perception of certain aspects of his own character. Without a personally-felt hatred for the life-denying force of gentility, and without that inner sense of its invidious influence upon his own creative energies,

he would not have gained such an urgent sense of the way it was sapping the vitality from political, cultural and social life. From the oppositions he felt, within his own art and personality, between the impulses of energy and enervation, he is led to explore these contrary impulses within human existence more generally. In his last novels, the dialectical oppositions of freedom and necessity, life and death, spirituality and physicality are considered and portrayed with a searching imaginative originality, which is unmatched by any other English novelist.

Although the sticky old saints of gentility not infrequently trap Dickens down in conventionality, his artistic energies are never for long restricted in these dead forms. The flight of his imagination is always a conquest of the 'horrid respectability', the 'little, finite, systematic routine' which he sees as characterizing British art and life. The word which more than any other sums up the unique quality of Dickens's writing is energy - a pushing, daring impulse of inventive exuberance, completely untrammelled by the conventional expectations of either art or society. It is this which gives his novels their sense of freedom despite the tight control of their closely unified social vision. With striking frequency these moments of imaginative 'apotheosis', like that of Eddard and his enthusiastic owner, involve characters of the working class. Scenes and incidents, like that of Wegg's wooden leg, raising itself of its own greedy volition



as he reads about miserly hoards of money, of Orlick snarling 'Wolf' at Pip, and of the crazed old woman in Oliver Twist insisting that her daughter's death is 'as good as a play', possess an imaginative power, a sharp unexpectedness, and a dazzling freshness of invention which simply have no comparison in the rest of English fiction. Like the French, whom Dickens admired, writing of this sort calls forth epithets like 'fearlessness', 'passion and action', and it is not surprising perhaps, that it so often involves working-class characters whose depiction, from the very beginning of Dickens's career, is marked by dramatic energy, unpredictability, and freedom from reification.

Gentility made one last direct attack upon Dickens; it diminished his reputation as a serious artist. As standards of decorum and public manners became more genteel and restrained, the extroverted behaviour of many of Dickens's characters came to seem at first extravagant and vulgar, and then unrealistic and naively-drawn. As early as 1825, Tom Moore described changes in social behaviour in terms reminiscent of the practices of Mrs General:

The natural tendencies of the excesses of the French Revolution was to produce in the higher classes of England an increased reserve of manner, and, of course, a proportionate restraint upon all within the circle, which have been fatal to conviviality and humour, and not very propitious of wit - subduing both manners and conversation to a sort of polished level, to rise above which is often thought to be almost as vulgar as to sink below it. 19

19 Memoirs of R.B. Sheridan, (London, 1825), quoted in Quinlan, p. 226.

The spread of such attitudes through Victorian society clearly would not be conducive to a sympathetic appreciation of art like Dickens's which deliberately sets out to challenge accepted forms of prose-style, fictional tradition and social conventions. In the year before his death the Spectator was already raising doubts about the efficacy of Dickens's moral teaching which reveal an underlying uneasiness as to his potentially subversive effect upon the English conventionalities. 'It [his teaching] is not really English, and it tends to modify English family feeling in the direction of theatric tenderness and an impulsiveness wholly wanting in self-control'.<sup>20</sup>

The changing pattern of public and private behaviour, the increasing stress upon scientific reasoning, and a growing interest in psychological explanations of personality, all encouraged the tendency to identify sensibility with rational intelligence and a cultivated and educated outward manner. From the time of George Eliot onwards, it was increasingly felt that the main task of an author consisted in depicting the inner complexities of soul in characters set apart from the general mass of humanity by their particularly sensitive natures. The reviewer of Hard Times quoted in an earlier chapter, who believed that the 'apparent uniformity' of manner in 'cultivated persons' shielded

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Ford, Dickens and His Readers, p. 107. Dickens had already mocked this kind of attitude in his article 'Insularities', in which he writes: 'One of our most remarkable Insularities is a tendency to be firmly persuaded that what is not English is not natural'. Miscellaneous Papers, II, 82.



'thousand-fold shades of difference, indicative of the mind within',<sup>21</sup> looks directly forward to critical approval of heroines like Dorothea Brooke, or of those characters depicted with such painstaking inner detail by Henry James. Nothing could be more contrary to the whole intention of Dickens in his fiction than this equating of intelligence and refinement with greater spiritual sensitivity. However, to writers like Eliot and then James, and to the critics and readers who admired their work, the lack of introspection in Dickens's characters and their aggressive, extroverted immediacy in action and speech, rendered them unsubtle, uninteresting and unconvincing in artistic terms, and suggested that their creator was at best a naive, old-fashioned writer, and at worst, nothing but a vulgar showman.<sup>22</sup>

Residues of such attitudes still persist in some Dickens criticism, revealing themselves in an unease about his methods of characterization, in charges of theatricality, and in patronizing comments on his lack of education and intelligence, even. This is particularly in evidence in those critics who place highest store upon the work of novelists like Austen, Eliot and James, all of whom write from within a more consciously intellectual, less popular

21 'The Natural History of German Life', Westminster Review, July, 1856, lxvi, in Dickens: the Critical Heritage, p. 343.

22 Apart from Ford's study of Dickens's fluctuating reputation, there is much useful information on this subject in 'Dickens and Fame 1870-1970: Essays on the Author's Reputation', Centenary Number, The Dickensian, 66 (May, 1970).



tradition than Dickens. Even sensitive critics, like Barbara Hardy and Robert Garis, are disturbed by what they feel to be crudity in Dickens's writing, and while they do not use the word vulgar, one feels it hovering behind their judgements. Dickens, himself, might have been wryly amused by Garis linking together the notions of a deficiency of gentility with a deficiency of morality in his art:

For just as the supreme moral ideal of a disinterested imaginative love has in our everyday life descended to bodies in the not contemptible form of good manners, good breeding and good form, so the achievement of this ideal in works of art has often been a matter 23 of conventional forms of decorum.

Despite various qualifications, Garis concludes that, 'it is against this code of literary manners that Dickens offends most obviously'. It is the contrary contention of this thesis that the so-called vulgarity or lack of decorum in Dickens's art is, in fact, its superb strength, and that his weakness can be better understood as an overwillingness to propitiate conventional opinion.

World history during this century has pushed back into prominence the existence of irrational, violent and uncontrollable forces in men, and shown the earlier confidence in the capacity of intelligence and rationality to solve the problems of human nature to be misplaced - to be part of those 'little, finite' mental systems which Dickens rightly perceived to be manifestations of the tidying-up impulse of gentility. A.E. Dyson makes a similar

23      Garis, p. 38.

point in a discussion of the validity of Dickens's method of characterization:

It accords very well with the grand melodrama of heaven and hell depicted in the Christian traditions, and with the grand inner melodrama depicted by Freud and Jung. It accords very much less well, as its author was the first to proclaim and realise, with the sober speculations of Jeremy Bentham, the laissez-faire utilitarians, and the earlier Mill. 24

One consequence of the changed view of the potential irrationality and savagery of men's natures has been a new appreciation of Dickens's novels, and especially of their more dark and violent aspects. What is perhaps still lacking is a true appreciation of the great positive images of life and creative freedom put forward by his art, largely in his working-class characters. Nothing could be more relevant to our own times. In place of demoralization, lost self-respect, and frightened energies, Dickens offers us the inspiration of Sam Weller - leap-frogging life with physical and imaginative delight.

24 'The Old Curiosity Shop: Innocence and the Grotesque', Dickens: Modern Judgements, edited by A.E. Dyson (London, 1968), p. 76.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

This bibliography lists all those books or articles to which reference is made in the thesis. In addition, it includes a selection of other works found most useful. The place of publication is London unless otherwise stated.

I. DICKENSA. Primary TextsThe Novels

Dickens, Charles, Works, The New Oxford Illustrated Dickens edition, 21 vols (1947-1958)

Dombey and Son, Clarendon Edition (1974)

The Mystery of Edwin Drood (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1974)

Miscellaneous Writings

Miscellaneous Papers, ed. by B.W. Matz, Gadshill edition (1908)

The Letters of Charles Dickens, ed. by Madeline House, Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson, Pilgrim edition (Oxford, 1965 -)

The Letters of Charles Dickens, ed. by Walter Dexter, Nonesuch Press, 3 vols (1938)

The Speeches of Charles Dickens, ed. by K.J. Fielding (Oxford, 1960)

The Uncollected Writings of Charles Dickens: Household Words 1850-1859, ed. by Harry Stone, 2 vols (1969)



B. Secondary SourcesBooks and Articles on Dickens

- Blount, Trevor, 'Dickens's Slum Satire in Bleak House',  
Modern Language Review, 60 (1965), 340-351
- 'Poor Jo, Education, and the Problem of Juvenile  
 Delinquency', Modern Philology, 62 (1965), 325-339
- 'The Chadbands and Dickens's View of Dissenters',  
Modern Language Quarterly, 25 (1964), 295-307
- 'The Graveyard Satire in Bleak House in the context  
 of 1850', The Review of English Studies, 14 (1963), 370-8
- Brook, G.L., The Language of Dickens (1970)
- Butt, John, and Kathleen Tillotson, Dickens at Work (1957)
- Carey, John, The Violent Effigy (1973)
- Chesterton, G.K., Charles Dickens (1975)
- Clark, Cumberland, Dickens and Democracy and other studies (1930)
- Cockshut, A.O.J., The Imagination of Dickens (1961)
- Collins, Philip, Dickens and Crime, second edition (1964)
- Dickens and Education, corrected second impression (1965)
- 'Dickens and Industrialism', Studies in English Literature,  
 20 (1980), 653-673
- Collins, Philip, ed., Dickens: The Critical Heritage (1971)
- 'Dickens and Fame 1870-1970', The Dickensian, Centenary number,  
 66 (1970), essays by P. Collins, K.J. Fielding et al
- Dyson, A.E., ed., Dickens: Modern Judgements (1968)
- Engel, Monroe, The Maturity of Dickens (1959)
- Fielding, K.J., Charles Dickens: A Critical Introduction (1965)
- Ford, G.H., Dickens and his Readers (Princeton, New Jersey,  
 1955)

- Ford, G.H., and Lauriat Lane, Jr., ed., The Dickens Critics (Ithaca, New York, 1961)
- Forster, John, Life of Charles Dickens, 2 vols (1966)
- Garis, Robert, The Dickens Theatre: A Reassessment of the Novels (Oxford, 1965)
- Gill, S.C., 'Allusion in Bleak House: A Narrative Device', Nineteenth-Century Fiction, 22 (1967), 145-154
- Gissing, George, Charles Dickens: A Critical Study (1898)
- Gribble, Jennifer, 'Depth and Surface in Our Mutual Friend', Essays in Criticism, 25 (1975), 197-213
- Gross, John, and Gabriel Pearson, ed., Dickens and the Twentieth Century (1962)
- Hardy, Barbara, Dickens: The Later Novels, revised edition (Harlow, Essex, 1977)
- The Moral Art of Dickens (1970)
- Holoch, George, 'Consciousness and Society in Little Dorrit' Victorian Studies, 21 (1978), 335-351
- House, Humphry, The Dickens World, second edition, Oxford University Press, paperback (1960)
- Humphreys, Ann, 'Dickens and Mayhew on the London Poor', Dickens Studies Annual, 4 (1975), 78-90.
- Jackson, T.A., Dickens: Progress of a Radical (1937)
- Johnson, Edgar, Charles Dickens, revised and abridged edition (1977)
- Kettle, Arnold, 'Charles Dickens: The Novelist and the People', Marxism Today, (1963), 48-54
- Kincaid, J.R., Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter (1971)



- Kucick, John, 'Death Worship among the Victorians: The Old Curiosity Shop', PMLA, 95 (1980), 58-72
- Leavis, F.R., and Q.D., Dickens the Novelist, third edition (1973)
- Lonoff, Sue, 'Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins', Nineteenth-Century Fiction, 35 (1980), 150-170
- Loughy, R.E., 'Remembrances of Death Past and Future: A Reading of David Copperfield', Dickens Studies Annual, 6 (1977), 72-101
- Lucas, John, The Melancholy Man, second edition (Sussex, 1980)
- McCarthy, P.J., 'The Language of Martin Chuzzlewit', Studies in English Literature, 20 (1980), 637-649
- Marcus, David D., 'Martin Chuzzlewit: The Art of Critical Imagination', The Victorian Newsletter, 54 (1978), 10-16
- Marcus, Steven, Dickens: from Pickwick to Dombey (1965)
- Miller, J. Hillis, Charles Dickens: The World of his Novels, Midland Book edition (1969)
- Nelson, Harland S., 'Dickens's Our Mutual Friend and Mayhew's London Labour and London Poor' Nineteenth-Century Fiction, 20 (1965), 207-222
- Nisbet, Ada, 'The Autobiographical Matrix of Great Expectations' Victorian Newsletter, 15 (1959), 10-13.
- Oddie, William, Dickens and Carlyle: The Question of Influence (1972)
- Orwell, George, 'Charles Dickens', in Collected Essays (1961) 31-87
- Pakenham, Pansy, 'Dickens and the Class Question', Victorian Newsletter, 16 (1959), 30



- Palmer, William J., 'Dickens and the Eighteenth Century',  
Dickens Studies Annual, 6 (1977), 15-39
- Price, Martin, ed., Dickens: A Collection of Critical Essays,  
 Twentieth Century Views series (Englewood Cliffs, New  
 Jersey, 1967)
- Pugh, Edwin, The Dickens Originals (1912)
- Sanders, Andrew, '"Come Back and Be Alive": Living and Dying  
 in Our Mutual Friend', The Dickensian, 74 (1978), 131-143
- Schwarzbach, F.S., Dickens and the City (1979)
- Smith, Sheila, 'John Overs to Charles Dickens: A Working  
 Man's Letter and its implications', Victorian Studies,  
 18 (1974) 195-217
- Stewart, Garrett, Dickens and the Trials of Imagination  
 (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1974)
- Stone, Harry, 'Fire, Hand and Gate: Dickens's Great  
 Expectations', Kenyon Review, 24 (1962), 662-691
- Sucksmith, H.P., 'Sir Leicester Dedlock, Wat Tyler and the  
 Chartists: The Role of the Ironmaster in Bleak House',  
Dickens Studies Annual, 4 (1975), 113-131
- Thurley, Geoffrey, The Dickens Myth: Its Genesis and Structure  
 (1976)
- Welsh, Alexander, The City of Dickens (1971)
- Wilkinson, A.Y., 'Bleak House: From Faraday to Judgement Day'  
English Literary History, 34 (1967), 225-247
- Wilson, Angus, The World of Charles Dickens (Harmondsworth,  
 Middlesex, 1972)
- Wilson, Edmund, 'Dickens: The Two Scrooges', in The Wound and  
 the Bow, revised edition (1961)

Woodward, Kathleen, 'Passivity and Passion in Little Dorrit',  
The Dickensian, 71 (1975), 140-8

## II OTHER LITERATURE

Arnold, Matthew, Culture and Anarchy, ed. by J. Dover Wilson  
 (1960)

Blake, William, The Complete Writings of William Blake, ed.  
 by Geoffrey Keynes (1966)

Burney, Fanny, Evelina, Oxford English Novels (1968)

Carlyle, Thomas, Heroes and Hero Worship, Centenary edition  
 (1897)

Past and Present, Centenary Edition (1897)

Sartor Resartus, Centenary edition (1896)

Selected Essays, Everyman's Library (1972)

Conrad, Joseph, The Secret Agent (Harmondsworth, Middlesex,  
 1963).

Defoe, Daniel, Moll Flanders, Everyman's Library (1972)

Disraeli, Benjamin, Sybil, The World's Classics series (1926)

Eliot, George, Felix Holt, Library edition (Edinburgh, 1901)

Silas Marner, Library edition (Edinburgh, 1901)

Fielding, Henry, Amelia, Everyman's Library (1962)

Joseph Andrews, Shakespeare Head edition, 2 vols,  
 (Oxford, 1926)

Tom Jones, Shakespeare Head edition, 4 vols (Oxford, 1926)

Gaskell, Elizabeth, Mary Barton, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex,  
 1970)

Gaskell, Elizabeth, North and South (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1970)

Gissing, George, The Nether World, Everyman's Library (1973)

Goldsmith, Oliver, The Vicar of Wakefield, Everyman's Library (1908)

James, Henry, Portrait of a Lady, Bodley Head edition (1968) V

The Princess Cassamassima (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1977)

Kingsley, Charles, Alton Locke, Everyman's Library (1910)

Yeast, Everyman's Library (1914)

Lord Chesterfield's Letters to his Son and Others, Everyman's Library (1929)

Meredith, George, The Egoist (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1968)

Richardson, Samuel, Sir Charles Grandison, Shakespeare Head edition, 6 vols (1931)

Shelley, Percy Bysshe, The Complete Poetical Works of Shelley, ed. by Thomas Hutchinson (Oxford, 1904)

Smollett, Tobias, Humphry Clinker, Shakespeare Head edition (Oxford, 1925)

The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle, Oxford University Press paperback (1969)

Roderick Random, Everyman's Library (1927)

Storey, David, This Sporting Life (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1962)

Surtees, R.S., Jorrocks's Jaunts and Jollities (1951)

Thompson, Flora, Lark Rise to Candleford (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1973)



Zola, Emile, Germinal, trans. by L.W. Tancock (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1954)

L'Assommoir, trans. by L.W. Tancock (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1970)

### III THE WORKING CLASS

#### A. Primary Sources

Bamford, Samuel, Autobiography of Samuel Bamford, ed. by W.H. Chaloner, 2 vols (1967)

Burnett, John, ed., Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820's to the 1920's (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1977)

Edwards, George, From Crow-Scaring to Westminster (1922)

Engels, Frederick, The Condition of the Working Class in England (Frogmore, St. Albans, Herts., 1969)

Hoggart, Richard, The Uses of Literacy (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1958)

Hollis, Patricia, ed., Class and Conflict in Nineteenth-Century England 1815-1850 (1973)

Hopkinson, James, Victorian Cabinet Maker: The Memoirs of James Hopkinson 1819-1894, ed. by Jocelyn Baty Goodman (1968)

Lovett, William, Life and Struggles of William Lovett (1876)

Llewellyn Davies, Margaret, ed., Life As We Have Known It (1977)

Mayhew, Henry, London Labour and London Poor, 4 vols (New York, 1968)

Palmer, Roy, ed., A Touch on the Times: Songs of Social Change 1770-1914 (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1974)

Thompson, E.P., and Eileen Yeo, ed., The Unknown Mayhew (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1973)

Wright, Thomas, The Great Unwashed (1868)

Younger, John, Autobiography of John Younger, Shoemaker, St. Boswells (Kelso, Roxburghshire, 1881)

#### B. Secondary Sources

Bottomore, T.B., Classes in Modern Society, second edition (1965)

Briggs, Asa and John Saville, ed., Essays in Labour History, revised edition (1967)

Cazamian, Louis, The Social Novel in England 1830-1850, trans. by Martin Fido (1973)

Chesney, Kellow, The Victorian Underworld (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1972)

Cole, G.D.H., Studies in Class Structure, (1955)

Crossick, Geoffrey, 'The Labour Aristocracy and its Values: A Study of Mid-Victorian Kentish London', Victorian Studies, 19 (1975), 301-328.

Eagleton, Mary, and David Pierce, Attitudes to Class in the English Novel: from Walter Scott to David Storey (1979)

Faber, Richard, Proper Stations: Class in Victorian Fiction (1971)

- Hammond, J.L., and Barbara Hammond, The Town Labourer, ed. by John Lovell (1978)
- Jackson, Brian, and Dennis Marsden, Education and the Working Class (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1966)
- James, Louis, Fiction for the Working Man (1963)
- Print and the People 1819-1851 (1976)
- 'The View from Brick Lane: Contrasting Perspectives in Working-Class and Middle-Class Fiction of the Early Victorian Period', The Yearbook of English Studies, 2 (1981), 87-101.
- Keating, Peter, The Working Class in Victorian Fiction (1971)
- Marcus, Steven, Engels, Manchester and the Working Class (1974)
- Meacham, Standish, A Life Apart: The English Working Class 1890-1914 (1977)
- Mészáros, István, Marx's Theory of Alienation, fourth edition (1975)
- Thompson, E.P., 'Eighteenth-century English society: class struggle without class?', Social History, 3 (1978), 133-165
- The Making of the English Working Class, revised edition (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1968)
- Thompson, Paul, 'Voices from Within', in The Victorian City, ed. by H.J. Dyos and Michael Wolff, 2 vols (1976), I, 59-80.
- Vicinus, Martha, The Industrial Muse (1974)



IV GENERAL STUDIES

- Bayley, John, 'The Pastoral of Intellect' in Critical Essays on George Eliot, ed. by Barbara Hardy (1970)
- Best, Geoffrey, Mid-Victorian Britain 1851-70 (1979)
- Bradley, Ian, The Call to Seriousness: the Evangelical Impact on the Victorians (1976)
- Briggs, Asa, Victorian Cities, revised edition (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1968)
- Calder, Jenni, Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction (1976)
- Coveney, Peter, The Image of Childhood, revised edition (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1967)
- Cunningham, Valentine, Everywhere Spoken Against: Dissent in the Victorian Novel (1975)
- Freud, Sigmund, Civilization and its Discontents, trans. by Joan Riviere, revised and ed. by James Strachey (1979)
- New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, trans. and ed. by James Strachey (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1973)
- Gilbert, Alan D., Religion and Society in Industrial England (1976)
- Haight, Gordon, S., ed., A Century of George Eliot Criticism (1966)
- Harrison, Fraser, The Dark Angel: Aspects of Victorian Sexuality (1977)
- Harrison, J.F.C., Early Victorian Britain 1832-51 (1979)
- Hollingsworth, K., The Newgate Novel 1830-47 (Detroit, 1963)
- Houghton, Walter E., The Victorian Frame of Mind (1957)
- Leavis, Q.D., Fiction and the Reading Public (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1979)

- Marcus, Steven, The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England (1967)
- Marcuse, Herbert, Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Enquiry into Freud (1956)
- Marshall, J.D., The Old Poor Law 1795-1834 (1968)
- Marshall, T.H., Citizenship and Social Class (1950)
- Marx, Karl, Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy, ed. by T.B. Bottomore and Maximilian Rubel (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1963)
- Page, Norman, The Language of Jane Austen (1972)
- Perkin, Harold, The Origins of Modern English Society 1780-1880 (1969)
- Platt, Joanne, 'The Development of English Colloquial Idiom During the Eighteenth Century', Review of English Studies, 2 (1926), 70-81
- Price, Martin, To the Palace of Wisdom: Studies in order and energy from Dryden to Blake, Arcturus Books edition (Carbondale, Illinois, 1970)
- Quinlan, Maurice J., Victorian Prelude: A History of English Manners 1700-1830 (New York, 1941)
- Rose, Michael E., The Relief of Poverty 1834-1914 (1972)
- Smiles, Samuel, Self-Help, revised edition (1910)
- Thomas, Keith, 'The Place of Laughter in Tudor and Stuart England', Times Literary Supplement, 21 January, 1977, 77-81
- Thompson, F.M.L., English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century (1963)

- Tillotson, Kathleen, Novels of the Eighteen-Forties,  
corrected edition, Oxford University Press paperback  
(1961)
- Tucker, Susie I., Protean Shape: A Study in Eighteenth-Century Vocabulary and Usage (1967)
- Walker, John, A Critical Pronouncing Dictionary and Expositor of the English Language, 23rd edition (1821)
- Wendel, Francois, Calvin: The Origins and Development of his Religious Thought, trans. by Philip Mairet,  
Fontana Library edition (1965)
- Willey, Basil, Nineteenth-Century Studies (1949)
- Williams, Raymond, Culture and Society 1780-1950  
(Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1963)  
Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society, Fontana  
Communications series (1976)  
Marxism and Literature (Oxford, 1977)  
The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence (Frogmore,  
St. Albans, Herts., 1974)
- Young, G.M., Victorian England: Portrait of an Age,  
second edition, Oxford University Press paperback  
(1960)